Northern Essex Community College

Distance Education Strategic Plan (2013-2016)

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Introduction: Distance education at NECC comes in two delivery forms: Web hybrid; and Web on (hereafter referred to as online). Today, twenty degree or certificate programs are offered online.

> Six degree programs are available 100% online: Business Management; Business Management: Computer Applications Option; Business Transfer; Computer and Information Sciences: Applications; General Studies; and Liberal Arts.

> An additional seven degree programs are available 80% online: Computer and Information Sciences: Information Technology; Criminal Justice; Liberal Arts: History Option; Liberal Arts: Philosophy Option; Liberal Arts: Political Science Option; Liberal Arts: Psychology Option; and Sleep Technology.

> Seven certificates are offered online: three at 100% -- Computer Applications, Help Desk, and Information Technology Fluency; and four at 80% -- Computer Forensics Basic, Computer Networking, Computed Tomography, and Web Design.

The College began reporting distance education data in the Spring of 2005. Since that time, enrollment patterns have emerged:[i]

- Online courses have increased from 41 to 63; online sections increased from 62 to 93.
- Online seats increased over the years from 1,055 in Spring 2005 to 1,860 in Fall 2012. The number of online seats has been decreasing since its all-time high of 2,182 in Spring 2010.
- Traditional courses/ Web Companion, Traditional courses/Web Enhanced, and Web Hybrid courses have increased in number and seats. In Fall 2012 there were 4,763 Web companion seats, 2,796 Web enhanced seats, and 1,333 Web hybrid seats -- indicating the value of distance education technology in traditional courses.
- Online course completion rates have been lower than traditional course completion rates. In Spring 2005, the online rate was 65% compared to the traditional rate of 78%. This gap, while smaller, was evident in Fall 2012 when the online rate was 67% compared to a traditional rate of 72%. Web Hybrid completion rate in Fall 2012 was 75%.

New Web-based approaches to higher education have catapulted into national discourse, and some are being tested in our backyard. In January 2013, Bunker Hill and Mass Bay Community Colleges began offering their students versions of open, online edX (MOOC) courses. California's Coastline Community College has announced a partnership with the University of Massachusetts Online in a distance education bachelor's degree pathway where students will enroll simultaneously at both institutions for in-state tuition. Southern New Hampshire University is launching College for America –a Web-based program in collaboration with employers to assess student competencies. In this new distance education approach to learning, students will work at their own pace outside of semester timelines, and virtual portfolios as opposed to grades and transcripts will document their competencies.

Distance education, as we have known it, is changing at a relatively rapid pace, and NECC can choose to embrace the innovations or be vulnerable to competing markets. Regardless of our decision, the College has been charged by the 2012-2015 Academic Master Plan to strategically plan its distance education program: *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.* [ii] Four members of the Academic Affairs Leadership Team were tasked to lead this initiative. They facilitated two Open Forums to help plan the future of distance education at the College; researched distance education elsewhere in the community college system in the Commonwealth; and so informed, drafted the following strategic plan.

Distance Education Mission: Northern Essex Community College is committed to providing students increased access to quality instruction by combining the best traditional methods with technological innovation in distance education.

Distance Education Vision: The College will transform teaching and learning through mindful use of educational technologies thus improving student access, retention, and success in distance education.

Goal 1: Ensure a financially sustainable infrastructure sufficient to operate distance education courses and student support services at a competitive level.

> *Objective 1.1:* Integrate distance education in college planning and operations, including the placement of the Director of Distance Education in Academic Affairs.
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> *Objective 1.2*: Provide cost analysis of the necessary elements for the successful deployment of distance education courses: personnel and technology upgrades used both at the course level and college-wide.
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> *Objective 1.3*: Provide hardware bandwidth for rich media (movie clips) and an interactive learning environment.
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> *Objective 1.4*: Explore new methods of content delivery including synchronous, hybrid and asynchronous systems.

Goal 2: Ensure that student learning is comparable in distance education and face-to-face courses.

> *Objective 2.1*: Confirm that program learning outcomes are addressed regardless of course delivery format.
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> *Objective 2.2*: Include distance education course sections in assessments of program learning outcomes.
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> *Objective 2.3*: Facilitate student learning by creating a common template for the navigation structure (not content) of individual courses. All new courses will use this common template which will incorporate universal design.
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> *Objective 2.4*: Implement best practices to improve student learning, including universal design.
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> *Objective 2.5:* Eliminate the gap in completion rates between distance and face to face courses.

Goal 3: Determine the programming that will be web-based and the frequency of its delivery.

    Objective 3.1: Retain a decentralized process whereby each Division and/or unit of the College (including but not limited to Academic Affairs) will decide whether or not to offer its courses, and/or programs, web-based. Divisions/units will submit their rationale to a committee consisting of faculty and representative stakeholders who will prioritize requests for online delivery.

    Objective 3.2: Review enrollment patterns in existing online courses to determine sustainability.

Goal 4: Invest in resources that sustain a supportive distance education learning environment for faculty and students.

    Objective 4.1: Provide students with interactive tools for assessing their online readiness. Require new students to demonstrate their readiness for distance education.

    Objective 4.2: Advise students about the expectations of distance education courses.

    Objective 4.3: Prepare faculty for diverse students and learning needs in a distance education environment.

    Objective 4.4: Regularly schedule professional development opportunities in the areas of pedagogy and use of distance education technologies.

    Objective 4.5: Ensure that policies and procedures for development and delivery of distance education courses are met.

Goal 5: Establish a centralized method of promoting/marketing distance education programs.

    Objective 5.1: Implement a web-based tool for advertising.

    Objective 5.2: Develop and distribute Public Service Announcements to target markets.

Goal 6: The Director of Distance Education will play a leadership role in the future direction of distance education at NECC.

    Objective 6.1: Establish policy for transferring credits from Massive Open Online Courses.

    Objective 6.2*:* Consider establishing distance education partnerships in education and with the business community.

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[i] Reports of NECC Online Courses, Office of Institutional Research and Planning (2005–2012).
[ii] 2012–2015 Academic Master Plan.