Northern Essex
Community College

ACADEMIC MASTER PLAN
2016-2020

Background

The Academic Master Plan (AMP) is the primary guide for strategic action in Academic and Student Affairs at Northern Essex Community College (NECC). This is the third AMP, which will cover the period 2016-2020. The first two AMPs were created with a "bottom up" approach, each contained many priorities, and each helped the college to achieve some important goals. However, the priorities were not necessarily part of a coherent, overall approach and tended to yield small or narrow improvements in student success. Moreover, the teams responsible for implementing these earlier plans were concerned with the large number of objectives and felt this spread the resources and attention of faculty and staff too thin. The current AMP process has revealed similar concerns about "initiative fatigue" and failing to see projects through to the end.

NECC is also confronted with the need to maintain enrollments, increase retention and graduation rates and do more with less resources. One example is the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's Vision Project, which calls for all public higher education institutions to focus on the "big three" strategies to increase the number of graduates. The big three are 1) boost college completion rates, 2) close achievement gaps, and 3) attract and graduate more students from underserved populations.

As the principles and other elements of this plan suggest, this AMP takes a different approach from previous plans with considerably **more focus on a single vision** and coherence among all facets of the plan.

This document was developed based on the following process:

- A **Core Team** consisting of full-time and DCE faculty, professional and support staff, and Academic and Student Affairs administrators was formed in February 2016. This group includes Jane Bailey, Deirdre Budzyna, Kim Burns, Amy Callahan, Lizzie Lynn Casanave, Tina Favara, Jennifer Fielding, Linda Giampa, Maria Gonzalez, Bill Heineman, John Murray, Gisela Nash, Jill Palermo, and Kelly Sullivan.

- Bill Heineman, at least one other member of the Core Team, and a note taker hosted 16 **discussion sessions** with Academic and Student Affairs employees between late February and early April 2016. For those that could not attend a session, an opportunity to provide input was offered electronically. Using both methods, **almost 180 employees participated**. This included about 70 full-time faculty, almost 20 DCE instructors, over 50 staff, and more than 20 administrators. At the sessions, in response to a series of questions, employees discussed factors that had helped them succeed in a difficult challenge in their lives. They explored how the external support they received, the internal resources they called upon, and the practical skills for success they used to meet this challenge could be offered to our students that are struggling at NECC. They also identified obstacles to making those types of support available to students. Finally, participants were asked for their best ideas to help students to include in the AMP. Notes were recorded for each session.

- The Core Team convened in mid-April to examine **patterns in the data** derived from the discussion sessions. The team noted the prevalence of comments related to **helping students establish personal relationships and a sense of belonging** as a prerequisite for academic

success. Also recognized was a desire for greater integration and synthesis in the college's work with students, with **more systematic collaboration across organizational boundaries**. Finally, the team agreed that participants were focused on the **primacy of the academic mission**, including the importance of identifying student goals early in their college careers, the need for a **structured curriculum** that would deliver on those aspirations, on the dominantly important role of the faculty-student relationship, and the need to balance rigor with student support.

- Based on this analysis and earlier experience, the Core Team developed a set of principles for developing this AMP, a vision for the plan, some potential changes in our approach that would fulfill that vision, and an implementation process. Those elements make up the rest of this document. The decision to leave much of the work of developing specific strategies to pursue this plan's vision and further details of implementation to the next stage of the AMP process is a deliberate one. The Core Team is too small to make such important decisions for Academic and Student Affairs. Instead, those **details will be developed by other teams with significantly greater representation** from faculty, staff, and administration. It is hoped that this will provide the new AMP with both plentiful ideas and abundant energy. The implementation process for the plan is discussed later in this document.

Principles for Developing this Academic Master Plan

1. Create a single shared vision that focuses on the academic growth and success of our students. This vision will have a limited number of interconnecting, systemic elements, avoiding "one-hit wonder" ideas.
2. Seek alignment between goals of the college strategic plan, technology master plan and recruitment plan—and if possible the Department of Higher Education's Vision Project—and the AMP.
3. Provide flexibility in the plan so that faculty and staff in different areas of the college can develop strategies to promote the vision and its elements in ways that work for them.
4. Set some deadlines for outcomes in the AMP implementation process but leave considerable flexibility (especially after the first year of the plan) to allow for learning and unexpected changes, challenges, and opportunities.

Elements of the 2016-2020 Academic Master Plan

Three overall themes arose repeatedly in the Academic Master Plan discussion sessions and in the lessons learned from our past AMPs:

- **Academics**: As a college, our primary mission is student learning. At the center of that process is the student-faculty relationship. Currently, that student-faculty relationship exists as one of many experiences students might have at NECC. Building student support around the core faculty-student relationship will create a more coherent student experience. Carefully structured, integrated academic pathways that guide the student to their academic and career goals and integrate the needed support services will lead to more consistent success for our students. In addition to fostering greater student/faculty engagement, opportunities for faculty—including adjunct instructors—to engage with each other in professional learning to

refine and improve curriculum and pedagogy will be a priority. Providing students with structured academic experiences, coupled with high expectations for their academic performance and behavior, will produce graduates ready for informed and effective participation in further education, the workforce and civic life.

- **Connections**: Without feeling a sense of belonging, without a personal connection to a peer, instructor, or staff member, without believing that in some sense NECC is "home," students are likely to struggle academically no matter what their level of skill is and no matter how much great teaching and support we provide them. Our current systems are not designed to help students make connections. As a result, too few of our students develop a meaningful connection with a member of the college community. Providing students with an academic "place to belong" and a culture of inclusion will make a difference in their persistence.

- **Integration:** The college offers myriad, high quality support services to students but neither students nor employees seem to have a clear picture of how best to navigate them. Advising, tutoring, financial aid, counseling, social support referral, co-curricular, and other services are ever changing, located in different places, are part of different units, and follow their own processes. Faculty work in different units, often in different locations from each other and from student support services, and in the evening when support services are often unavailable. A systemic approach which teams these essential elements of the student experience together— courses, advising, tutoring, co-curricular activities, etc.—will provide a more coherent experience for students and a more satisfactory one for employees. Technology will be leveraged to create tighter integration of student support services.

Vision for the 2016-2020 Academic Master Plan

Combined together, these three elements support a vision for the 2016-2020 Academic Master Plan at NECC:

Students will identify and achieve their academic and career goals through highly structured academic experiences that provide opportunities to build relationships with their peers, faculty and staff in meaningful and substantial ways. Students will experience a personalized, integrated support system as part of clearly articulated student academic pathways. Faculty and staff will engage in a team-based approach to educating and supporting students that recognizes their key role in student success, and values the contributions of each employee at every level.

Possible Ways to Move Forward

What this vision translates into precisely in concrete terms must be determined during the implementation phase of the plan, but **the Core Team discerned substantial concern about existing conditions and desired changes in a number of areas crucial to student success**. These areas do not encompass every idea or concern that surfaced during the AMP discussion sessions or in the feedback on the drafts of the AMP. To include every comment would be to lose the focus we need in this plan. However, some of the comments are likely to be addressed in other plans at the college, like the

technology plan, and others are likely to be useful in the implementation process. **What follows is not a list of things we absolutely *will* do, but issues that garnered substantial energy, enthusiasm, and concern in the discussion sessions and feedback on the two drafts**. In each case, the themes of Academics, Connections, and Integration are central to the desired change.

<u>Academics</u>

Current Status	Desired Change
Goal Setting: students experience varying levels of help in exploring professional and life goals, with many remaining unsure of their desired outcomes right through their education at NECC.	An academic and career goal setting discussion built into the entry process for every new student, and especially students who are undecided on their academic program, with greater involvement of faculty and more consistent reevaluation of those goals throughout students' time at NECC.
Curriculum: students experience varying levels of structure depending on their major ranging from little choice of courses and sequence in many of the Health programs to much looser requirements in Liberal Arts.	Every academic major will consist of one or more structured pathways so all students know what courses they can/must take, when they can/must take them and which milestones are important to meet along the way. Our curriculum will prepare students for academic, professional, and civic life. Full-time and DCE Faculty will be supported in this work with timely and relevant professional development in the discipline.
Academic Expectations: both faculty and students express concern about the variability of expectations—especially excessively low expectations—for academic rigor and student behavior even in different sections of the same course.	Faculty will set high expectations consistent with college-level work and will consider (within the limits of Academic Freedom) how differing expectations—or even uncertainty about expectations—may undermine student success. Collaborative inquiry and assessment of student learning are possible ways for full-time and DCE faculty to examine academic expectations.

<u>Connections</u>

Current Status	Desired Change
Orientation: fewer than half of new students attend this half-day program focused on basic campus information and support services.	A lengthier, mandatory program that builds personal connections with peers, faculty, and staff and extends through the first year experience—such as that provided by the First Year Seminar—would better prepare students.
Cohorts: cohorts of students naturally form in some majors (which tend to have better student outcomes) but not in others, contributing to inconsistency in the sense of student belonging at NECC.	The college will work to intentionally build more student cohorts into its systems, through the use of structured academic pathways, default scheduling, culturally inclusive co-curricular activities, and other means.

Integration

Current Status	Desired Change
Academic Advising: students experience varying levels of guidance (whether in CPAC, with a faculty advisor, or both) around choosing an academic major and developing and executing a plan for their studies.	Every student chooses an academic major that closely connects to their chosen career or other goals when they arrive and follows a default schedule for their courses through graduation, with a consistent relationship with an advisor that specializes in their academic area of interest.
Cross-Functional Collaboration: faculty and various student support units tend to work in silos with collaboration dependent on individual initiative by employees or units to work across bureaucratic boundaries.	Build interdisciplinary, cross-functional teams of employees within academic divisions and majors centered on the faculty-student relationship and assisted by support staff who specialize in working with those students and faculty.
Student Support: abundant, high quality student support available but in multiple locations, reporting up different chains of command, and not easily understood by students or employees nor consistently connected to faculty.	Better coordinated student support that is widely understood by employees and students, with flexibility to meet changing student needs, and avoids duplication of effort. Professional staff will be supported in this work with timely and relevant professional development, and technology will be leveraged to integrate student services.

Implementation Process

The potential changes suggested above are each substantial in their own way and collectively represent a very significant shift in the way we educate and support students. The AMP discussion sessions and feedback on the two drafts of the plan surfaced many **obstacles to these suggested changes**, including time and resource scarcity, regulatory and contractual demands, initiative fatigue, fear of change and of the unknown, and the demands on our students' time. The Core Team acknowledges these concerns and likely other real barriers to change. Any realistic plan of implementation must explicitly account for such obstacles. The team also notes the energy and enthusiasm from nearly 180 meeting participants for trying something different in our work, with our students and with each other. We believe NECC can overcome these obstacles for the better of our college community, and ultimately for the success of our students who are our number one priority.

With the completion of this Academic Master Plan document for 2016-2020, the first phase of our work is done. **The much more complex, challenging, and ultimately meaningful work of implementation now begins**. The basic model for starting implementation is to take the potential changes listed above and group them into broader categories. To do this, we plan to use the extensive feedback received on the two drafts of the AMP. In that process we found energy, interest, enthusiasm, and concern around a number of topics including **Orientation, Advising, Student Goal Setting, Guided Curriculum Pathways, Academic Expectations, Coordinated Student Support, Cross-Functional Teams, Student Cohorts, the Role of Adjunct Faculty**, and more.

The first step will be to invite all employees interested in each category together to build consensus on the challenges we are facing and **develop goals for what we want to accomplish in the next four years,**

strategies to pursue those goals, and metrics to measure our progress. Many of these categories obviously will be focused on faculty work, so these initial meetings will not occur until the early fall. However, the hunger for an accessible, well-coordinated, easy to understand student support system can start to be addressed this summer. We will invite all interested parties to a meeting in June to begin conversations on our current system of student support and what specific strategies might help us to improve it.

As we build consensus on specific goals, strategies, and metrics in each category, we will create teams that will pursue them over the four years of the plan. **The teams will include all the key stakeholders involved with that category—for student support services, for instance, anyone that works in that area—and anyone else interested in participating**. For those categories relevant to faculty, we will make specific efforts to encourage the participation of adjunct instructors so that their role is clear in our goals and strategies.

The four year length of this AMP is extensive, so **we will not launch an effort to pursue every one of the ideas above during the plan's first year**. Instead, we will try to map out which of those ideas are needed as prerequisites before other ideas can be pursued. Working on the coordination of our student support services, for instance, may be necessary before we can build cross-functional teams between those services and faculty. In some cases, work on one specific idea may provide helpful information and experience to pursue others. For example, we could launch work on Orientation of new students to the college this fall. Since that is likely to involve stakeholders from both student support and faculty departments, it may be that this part of the plan will give us some practice in creating cross-functional teams. If successful, such teams could serve as a template for cross-functional teams that would support other aspects of the student experience, such as academic advising.

Current budget realities and time constraints mean that we will not be able to achieve the aims of this AMP through substantial investments of new money or time (human hours). Instead, **we will have to reimagine how we use our existing financial and employee resources**. We will examine changes to the master course schedule to allow more productive out-of-class time for cross-functional teams to serve students and undertake more radical revisions of the meeting schedule to focus more time on faculty-student activities, co-curricular events, and spontaneous fun. We also note a well-intentioned habit at NECC of bending our rules in the name of accommodating every different student situation. Unfortunately, this undermines the advantages of a consistent, structured approach to serve the majority of students. **The new AMP foresees more of a systemic approach in which following mandatory processes is the default choice for students, while also allowing some flexibility to account for individual student needs**.

Finally, in pursuing each of these potential changes**, we will endeavor to assure that the goals of the Academic Master Plan drive the use of support tools—such as technology, professional development, and the budget—instead of the other way around.** The software we purchase, the training we provide faculty (including DCE instructors) and staff, and the resources we allocate should all be designed to advance the goals and strategies we develop within the AMP. The team acknowledges feedback from employees that such alignment is not necessarily the norm right now.

Timeline for Starting Implementation

Summer 2016	Work on the Student Support parts of the AMP begins.
Summer/Fall 2016	Work on other parts of the AMP, involving faculty, begins.