Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Quality in Online Learning.

Quality Report

The Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on the Future Direction of Quality Education is charged with:

- Defining quality in online/distance education
- Identifying strategies to ensure excellence
- Proposing methodologies to evaluate quality

From the outset, the Committee felt it would be premature if not altogether inappropriate to propose any prescriptive 'definition' of quality. Instead, we decided to develop a list of \ "quality indicators" based on the **predominant pedagogical values** and **broad expertise** of FGCU teaching faculty, as elicited by a survey consisting mainly of free-answer questions.

We based our findings on 73 usable responses. The following explanation of our findings should be understood as a first step to developing faculty-driven policies and structures designed to promote quality online learning at FGCU. A fuller description of the survey results is found in **Appendix A, Summary Compilation of Data**. The exported raw survey data is available in the accompanying **Excel spreadsheet**.

Of the respondents, 24 have never taught online and 49 have taught online. The respondents were distributed in a bell curve (21 – 31 – 21) in terms of years of teaching experience, with the majority (31) having 6-15 years of experience. 40 of the respondents had themselves taken an online course, and 33 had not.

Despite a few outliers, the survey revealed broad areas of consensus and several preponderant themes related to perceived advantages and strengths of online learning, areas of greatest concern about quality in online instruction and specific indicators of quality.

Perceived advantages of online learning for students and faculty:

- Overwhelmingly, faculty cited **convenience and flexibility for students** as the main "advantage" of online learning. To a lesser extent, **flexibility and convenience for faculty** was also cited as a reason why some faculty might prefer to teach online.

- Also cited frequently as an "advantage" was the **potential of online learning for expanding access to college for underserved demographic groups and a more diverse range of students.**

- A significant number of faculty (all of whom had taught online) indicated that faculty choose to teach online because they find it **personally rewarding**, **challenging** and/or **pedagogically advantageous.**

Other "advantages" mentioned less frequently included:

- The perception that online teaching it is less stressful or easier once the course is set up (though a significant number of faculty who teach online stated that online courses are significantly MORE work when properly designed and facilitated).

- The perception that online learning offers certain practical advantages to institutions, especially a potential for saving money / labor and reducing pressure on physical facilities on-campus.

- Some faculty apparently believe that some students may see "advantages" in online learning for negative reasons: because (they claim) students believe online courses are less rigorous, easier to earn good grades in, require less over-all time to complete or make cheating easier.

Indicators of quality in online education according to faculty:

The most important factors, cited by a preponderance of faculty, were:

- **High-quality facilitation: instructor "presence," instructor engagement, timely response and feedback, effective course communications.**

- **Interactive course design** (opportunities for peer-to-peer and instructor-student personal interaction).

- **Quality of content and assignments stressing critical thinking and constructivist methodologies**; "best practice" pedagogy, rigor, clear learning outcomes, meaningful, in-depth assessments that assure maintenance of academic integrity, and the ability of students to apply what they have learned.

- **Strong preparation and organization**, clear, easily navigated course design, clear communications and instructions.

Also cited were:

- Course objectives, classroom experiences, academic rigor and learning outcomes **comparable to the equivalent face-to-face courses.**

- **Diversity** of instructional modes / formats / activities / assignments / content.

- Reliable, fast **technology.**

The main concerns that faculty had about attaining quality in online learning were:

- **The loss of face to face contact and real-time feedback and communication**. This was cited by many thoughtful respondents as being both highly important to teaching and learning, and very difficult to replicate in an online setting.

- **Academic integrity.** Is the student taking the course, writing the papers and taking the exams the student who is getting the grade?   Do online modalities not just enable, but tend to <u>encourage</u> a cheating culture, especially in larger classes and high-stakes, required or "gateway" classes?

- **Student motivation, preparation, skill-levels, maturity and self-discipline**. These have a big influence on outcomes in all kinds of classes, but quite a few faculty felt that a significant number of students lack the motivation, organization, self-discipline, time-management, or even reading / writing skills needed for success in online learning.

- The perception that **not all types of content are good fits for online learning**, especially those requiring hands-on and experiential learning strategies, or that teach "soft" skills, behavioral skills and skills that may not be well-communicated in

writing (learning how to draw or paint, learning workplace etiquette and interpersonal skills, doing a lab experiment or learning a sequence of manual skills in a nursing or athletic training program were cited as examples).

- **A lack of instructor experience and training;** a need for comprehensive faculty development targeted to online course design and facilitation.

- The need to provide **better support / orientation / advising to students in online courses**, both for students on campus and for true distance-learners.

- The need for **time** so faculty are able to take advantage of development opportunities (course loads are so heavy, and the new schedule so much more difficult to manage, that faculty often encounter barriers to participating in development opportunities).

- **Fair compensation and equity**: in course loads, assignments, and for the extra up-front work involved in creating online courses (as with the relative cost of online instruction, perceptions vary widely based on what kind of course is being envisioned. High-quality online instruction can be an immense amount of work, while "canned" online courses with little interaction and few assessments may be less work.)

- Need for **"helpdesk" point-of-need support 24/7** for faculty and students. The more interactive and complex the course, the more faculty need rapid help with the technology and design, and as with students taking the courses, faculty are not necessarily working on the course only during weekday hours M-F/9-5.

Discussion:

We note that the major perceived **advantages** to online education cited by FGCU faculty were predominantly **administrative** and **practical** (convenience, cost, expansion of audience) while the major perceived **disadvantages** cited were related to **pedagogical quality** (worries about negative impacts on the learning experience due to the loss of face-to-face contact, depersonalization, a lack of student preparation, quality of outcomes, communications difficulties and so on.)

The most pervasive underlying concern, expressed by a large number of faculty, is that online learning is being "pushed" primarily due to its practical advantages, but that expansion of online offerings are likely to involve a diminution of pedagogical quality due to perceived limitations: lack of personal contact, low pedagogical rigor and/or a preponderance of superficial interaction or assessment.

The Committee believes that at least some of this concern might be alleviated by more familiarity with actual online courses designed and taught according to current best practices. Few faculty, even many who teach online or have taken online courses in the past, have had enough opportunity to observe a really excellent online course in action. Those of us who have experience of online learning may not have had the best kind of experience. There still seems to be a tendency, sadly reinforced in the popular media, to assume that all online courses are alike, or that they all resemble early-generation, static

"canned courses," or like large-enrollment MOOCs, where facilitation standards are low and there is no way to assess learning meaningfully. Currently FGCU has no regular program to familiarize faculty with the skills and principles of online course design and facilitation.

Based on the findings of the Faculty survey, a review of student feedback on online instruction, and a review of the literature on online learning, the Committee suggests the following:

- The faculty should take responsibility for promoting quality in online learning, by creating a standing Senate committee charged with the task of developing recommendations, policies, structures and resources in support of quality online learning. It will take a long term process to develop this adequately.

- All stakeholders should collaboratively create a culture of quality online education on campus. All of us — not just those who are teaching online — have a stakeholder interest in maintaining a high standard of education at FGCU, including online education. Every administrator and faculty member who has responsibility for student learning and success deserves time and opportunity to observe quality online courses in action, participate in learning communities, and develop the skills and knowledge needed for teaching online, supporting students and faculty engaged in online learning, and/or for making informed curriculum decisions about courses that use online methodologies.

- We should recognize that not every type of educational challenge has been solved yet for online instruction. There are still real barriers and limitations, types of content that are difficult to deliver online, types of students who may have more difficulty learning online, certain channels of communication that are harder to achieve online. But by the same token, face-to-face learning has many challenges as well. There are less-than-ideal face-to-face formats in use across the campus, and significant variations of quality among formats and among individual courses. In some situations, an online approach or a hybrid approach might be better than a face-to-face approach. Some subjects, audiences, and learning styles are especially well-served by online course delivery. A more rational approach would be to provide a spectrum of possible solutions and some "benchmarks" of quality that could apply to all modalities, online and face-to-face, and then try to find the best compromise or combination for a given situation.

In conclusion, we offer the following thoughts:

(1) The distinction between "quality in online education" and "quality face-to-face education" may not be a particularly useful one. There was broad consensus among faculty that the determination of quality in online courses should be based on whether they meet **common standards of quality applicable to any type of course**. Are the course structure, outcome goals, and expectations clear? Is the content relevant and meaningful? Is the course design and facilitation suited to the subject-matter and skill set that it is trying to teach? Are students engaged and satisfied? Are assignments and activities of the sort

that most enhance learning, growth and retention? Does the course offer opportunities for developing authentic, meaningful interactions and relationships among participants (instructors and students)?   Does the course develop student practical skills, self-knowledge, resilience, engagement, knowledge and "soft" skills needed in life, school and the workplace?   Can student achievement be measured adequately, in a way that maintains academic integrity? Can students apply what they learn?

(2) We are still at the beginning of the digital revolution and the online education movement. We are also in a period of dramatic change occurring in education theory and administration at all levels. While there is much research on how students best acquire knowledge and skills, there is much still to be learned, and we need to be aware that our experience so far is relatively limited.   It is therefore probably too early to make any definitive proclamations what can and cannot be taught online, or what specific features may be essential for ensuring "quality."

(3) Within this dynamic environment, there are some additional specific actions FGCU can take to further develop the culture of quality education both online and face-to-face.

- We can continue to support shared governance and recognize that educational excellence cannot be achieved unless we acknowledge the primary role of faculty, schools and programs in overseeing education quality at all levels across the campus.

- We can make an effort to identify course design, hiring and teaching assignment practices that tend to result in either better or poorer-quality outcomes for our students and more- or less-rewarding teaching experiences for our faculty.

- Structures can be put in place to incentivize individuals and units (schools, programs, departments) to encourage the proven good practices that result in better outcomes and discourage the implementation of practices that are known to be less effective.

- We can establish criteria for determining the right balance between practical considerations and pressures, on the one hand, and pedagogical quality and student success, on the other. Such criteria might be brought to bear during the curriculum approval process, for example.

- Department chairs and program leaders can be encouraged to take a more active and informed role in promoting quality practices or approaches.

- Through the Lucas Center for Teaching and Learning and Academic Affairs, we can improve faculty development opportunities in the areas of online course design and facilitation. Besides making the opportunities available, it is important to recognize that for many faculty, heavy course loads, inconvenient schedules or the state of being contingent faculty create significant barriers to participation in professional development. For quality to be improved over-all, more faculty have to be assisted and incentivized to take part.

- We can take steps to enhance the infrastructure of online learning — student orientation, technology support, advising, helpdesk assistance and accessibility, adaptive services support, access to digital tools, software and hardware.

- We can open a more explicit discussion about load equity, faculty compensation, academic freedom, and intellectual property issues affecting faculty teaching online and faculty teaching in non-traditional formats such as large scale-up courses. Right now there are great inconsistencies: one faculty member may have three or four online sections of 25 students as a full load, while another in a different discipline may be trying to facilitate one online section of 70 or 150 students while teaching two or three other courses face-to-face.