

Report to the President

Technology Education Task Group

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Introduction

“Supporting the ever changing day-to-day needs of today’s college students requires a multifaceted approach that combines leading-edge technology with integrated social networking solutions.” NASPA Leadership Exchange/Spring 2012, pg. 21 speaks directly to the task many colleges and universities are attempting to address. York College is no exception.

A recent article in the November 1st issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education entitled “Online vs. Traditional Learning: Time to End the Family Feud”, http://chronicle.com/article/Online-vs-Traditional/12511/?sid=cr&utm_source=cr&utm_offered that “only about half the students who begin higher education finish. The number is less than one-fourth when you look at low-income students and slips far lower if you include first-generation students. Even more challenging is that the types of students who are least likely to succeed -low-income, minority, part-time and adult learners – represent the fastest- growing segment of higher education. In sum, traditional methods aimed at traditional students won’t work.”

Given the rapidly changing educational technology horizon, and our student demographic, if we are to be successful in meeting the curricular and co-curricular needs of our student body, our commitment to diversity must extend itself not only to whom we teach or what we teach, but how that teaching is delivered as well as adjusting our organization and support structures to meet diverse student needs.

With that goal in mind, the President created a Technology Education Task Group to study the internal and external landscape on utilizing emerging technology. Most directly, we were asked to study our condition by reviewing current practices, procedures, policies and outcomes at York as they compare to national, regional or peer best practices and to make a series of recommendations that might be implemented in fall 2012. Further our report should include but not be limited to:

1. Respond to the expansion of digital information and tools that increasingly shape modern life;
2. Diversify learning venues and opportunities that can attract a host of diverse students, all engaged in the mode of learning that best suits their learning styles and situations;
3. Use the experience and expertise of our faculty and staff, guided by accessible modes of learning and teaching, to create a niche in higher education;
4. Engage faculty and students in meaningful learning and innovative pedagogies;
5. And, explore learning modes and delivery systems that can inspire pedagogical and intellectual innovation, flexible scheduling choice to students that live at a distance who may be traditionally underserved, as well as providing access to technology (e.g. vice conference) for the purpose of building global academic partnerships.

This report presents our ideas and recommendations based on the Middle States guidelines, national standards, research articles of best practices, and our faculty, student survey results. Our ultimate goal as an institution is to ensure that our students have the preparation, experiences, and skills to not only compete successfully in the world marketplace, but also become critical thinkers, creative and responsible citizens who will meet the challenges of the knowledge society.

Blackboard Alternative

The University sponsored learning management system (LMS), Blackboard has been the primary focus for conducting web-based instruction across CUNY. The platform is integrated with CUNY's Student Information Management System (SIMS), which conveniently creates a 'virtual classroom' for every section of every course semester after semester. The instructor has the choice to make this digital space available to registered students for any course, not just hybrid and online sections.

A Blackboard virtual classroom provides a tremendous number of tools to support instruction including grade books, quiz generators, discussion forums, digital drop-boxes, wikis, and more. To date, faculty workshops for web-based instruction at York College have principally focused on the pedagogical uses of these tools to support teaching and learning.

Despite the numerable resources provided by Blackboard, it does have drawbacks as an LMS. The platform is structured around a traditional classroom construct, where the instructor must initiate all activities. Students for example cannot create their own discussion forum topics, blogs, and wikis, discouraging opportunities for students to consider themselves as producers of knowledge and faculty as facilitators of learning. As well work created by students cannot be easily repurposed and exported for personal archives, e-portfolio, and other uses. In fact at the end of a semester the University encourages faculty to turn off access to a course, which effectively bars the student from retrieving and reflecting on past work.

Finally, all Blackboard activities are behind a password-protected wall, creating a *closed* virtual classroom. There is no opportunity to surface student work, make it visible to others online. This disallows connections between classes or outside of the university. As higher education continues to contemplate 'openness,' as being part of it's future (see [MIT Open Courseware](#), [Stanford's Artificial Intelligence MOOC](#), and our own [CUNY Academic Commons](#)), an LMS that does not use wide employed web 2.0 styled interoperability and protocols will not be sufficient.

Because of these and other constraints in the University LMS, a number of CUNY campuses including ours have been experimenting with alternative platforms to support a variety of activities including e-portfolio and web-based instruction. With a grant brought by Prof. Michael Cripps, York College piloted an e-portfolio program using a platform built on the open-source software Wordpress & Buddypress (WP/BP). Faculty and students had the opportunity to investigate e-portfolio pedagogies with support from LaGuardia's *Making Connections* e-portfolio program seminar.

The pilot exceeded expectations and participating faculty had over a thousand students working on 'blogs' to support a variety of learning outcomes. Because the WP/BP platform is extremely flexible, some faculty used it to support classroom instruction.

There are three other campuses across CUNY, which have adopted WP/BP to support a variety of web-based academic activities: [eportfolios@Macaulay](#), [Blogs@Baruch](#), and [OpenLab at City Tech](#). Also there is the University supported [CUNY Academic Commons](#), a space built by and for CUNY faculty, staff, and graduate students to host a large variety of interactions across campuses. Broad interest in the CUNY Academic Commons has led to the development team receiving a Sloan Foundation grant to develop a 'Commons-in-a-Box' – an installable WP/BP platform that can be used by academic organizations to create their own hosted social network and self-publishing platform, supporting innumerable academic activities.

TO DO Support for York College's WP/BP platform provides us an opportunity to continue our investigation of the rapidly evolving landscape of online teaching and learning. Faculty and students can create and use digital tools that will allow connections unlike the University LMS.

Faculty Support

Faculty support is crucial to the success of online/hybrid and web-based instruction. Based on the Middle States guidelines for the evaluation of distance education (The Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2011) and The Sloan Consortium's quality scorecard for the administration of online programs (2011), the institution should ensure that faculty who teach online courses receive training, assistance and support at all times when they develop and deliver the courses. The professional development for faculty teaching online should be provided continuously and incorporate best pedagogical practices. Faculty is introduced to the emerging technology and their use in education.

Currently the Educational Technology department provides faculty online/hybrid course development program, instructional technology workshops and online self-paced tutorials, in-person and email technical support and troubleshooting problems at all times. We have clearly stated standards for online/hybrid course design, development and delivery based on best practices proposed by The Sloan Consortium (2011) and the Quality Matters Rubric (Quality Matters, 2011). They are used for peer-review of newly developed online/hybrid courses.

TO DO * However, there is still a lot that needs to be done. From a recent faculty survey on teaching online we can see 54% out of the 87 respondents indicate that the top two things that the College should do to support online/hybrid instruction are to provide more and better technical support, and more compensation and release time for course re-design and revision. 38% of respondents indicate that they need more and better instructional design support, and better preparation of the students who want to take online/hybrid courses.

The Educational Technology department needs to provide on-going professional development activities for web-based teaching and learning such as showcase, webinars, do more reaching-out to the faculty members to meet their needs, creates faculty handbook on online/hybrid and web-based instruction, provide documents and training on Fair Use, plagiarism, and other relevant legal and ethical concepts. They also need to explore the emerging technologies and innovative pedagogy, introduce them to faculty members, and help faculty make the transition to web-based instruction. As the advancement of information and communications technology, we should take the advantages of so many good web-

based, free or low-cost tools and reflect on the way student learn nowadays and adjust the way we teach. The faculty instructional technology lab, which is in the making, will provide a physical space for faculty to experiment and practice with using technology for teaching and learning, receive assistance from technical staff, obtain consultation with respect to instructional design, and exchange ideas among peers. The CUNY Academic Commons, on the other hand, will be used as a virtual space to build a community of practice for online/hybrid and web-based teaching and learning.

Student Support

In The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2011) they propose that

“The institution’s admissions program for online learning provides good web-based information to students about the nature of the online learning environment, and assists them in determining if they possess the skills important to success in online learning; the institution provides an online learning orientation program, support services to students in formats appropriate to the delivery of the online learning program, students in online learning programs have adequate access to student services, including financial aid, course registration, and career and placement counseling, have ready access to 24/7 tech support, have adequate access to learning resources, including library, information resources, laboratories, and equipment and tracking systems, students using online learning demonstrate proficiency in the use of electronic forms of learning resources.”

Currently the Educational Technology department has a website that provides information on online/hybrid courses, conducts in-person online/ hybrid course orientation sessions at the beginning of the semester, and create tutorials on how to use course related technologies. The challenge is that there is no mechanism to ensure that students fully understand what an online course is, whether it is right for them and what technology and learning skills are needed to be successful in such a course. There is no guarantee that students review the information on the website and understand what are involved in an online course. We recommend taking these steps; some are based on Harrell II (2008):

1. The Registrar’s Office establishes a procedure that allows students to register for an online course if they pass a pre-registration test.
2. Students who wish to enroll in an online course have to take the pre-registration test. This test asks questions related to their willingness to take the responsibility of their learning, to allocate time to study, to meet the technical requirements needed in the online course, and to learn technology skills. All of these are the necessity to be successful in an online course. The test score will be sent to the Registrar’s Office.
3. For students who fail the pre-test but still want to take an online course, they are referred to a counselor. After speaking with the counselor and reviewing the test questions, the student will need to come up with a plan on how to study in the online course and take the test again. If they pass the test, they will be able to enroll in an online course. The counselor will contact these students regularly to provide necessary support.

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4. Online course faculty makes the course initial tasks ready and available to students one week before the semester starts. The initial tasks include but not limited to course syllabus, a welcome message, a forum asking students to introduce themselves and some getting started assignments.
5. The Educational Technology department sends a letter via mail to the students who enrolled in an online course two weeks before the semester starts. In this letter students are asked to get on their course site one week before the semester starts, in addition, they are asked to study the information about online courses and attend orientation sessions.
6. The Educational Technology department conducts in-person orientation sessions at the beginning of the semester to prepare students with the appropriate learning and technology skills.
7. The Educational Technology department creates self-paced online orientation course for those who have the ability to study by themselves and those who cannot come to campus physically.
8. A counselor is assigned to each online course and will provide proper intervention to the students who do not "show up" in online classrooms.
9. College assistants are assigned to online courses acting as mentors to help students with technology issues. The assigned mentors will subscribe to the discussion board forum "Questions and problems with the technology used for the course" to answer technical questions and provide assistance.
10. Using WordPress platform to build an online community. Community facilitators should be assigned. Such an online community could help online students feel a sense of belonging and get involved on campus life or find study groups. It will also be used as a virtual space where students can ask questions about technology and get answers.

How? From a recent student survey on their attitudes towards online/hybrid and web-based instruction about 62% out of 81 respondents answered that the College should provide equal access to academic resources as those for on-site students when asked what they think the College can do for online/hybrid course students. In order for online students to have adequate access to all learning resources provided for on-site students such as Library, Writing Center, Tutoring, Advisement, these units should develop online component. For example, Library can use a webinar platform to conduct information literacy sessions for online students and create self-paced eLearning modules on various topics related to library database search and information literacy. Likewise, online students should have adequate access to student services such as financial aid, course registration online.

Evaluation and Assessment

In order to ensure the quality of the online/hybrid and web-based courses, we need to periodically evaluate and assess (The Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2011; The Sloan Consortium, 2011)

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- The alignment of the resources, activities, assignments and assessment with the learning objectives at the course level, and course objectives align with the program goals;
 - Student learning outcomes;
 - Teaching effectiveness by peers and students based on established standards;
 - Faculty and student support services.

The results will be used to improve teaching, learning and support services.

We recommend that the College Assessment Committee work with the Institutional Research on this. The Educational Technology will help with the technology that can facilitate this process.

A Systems Approach

As pointed out by Moore and Kearsley (2012), online learning can be better understood and successfully practiced using a systems view. That is, we should think not only that teaching and learning will happen online but also that they need support structure. As we know, faculty need to have access to the technology systems where they perform their instructional tasks, students studying in courses need many other services provided by the college, both faculty and students need technology support. However, our academic and student support services are built based on face-to-face class model. Consequently, the students taking online courses do not have adequate access to them. For example, some online courses require students taking proctored exams such as in some professional programs. We know that one of the major reasons many students take online courses is that they cannot be at the fixed place at a fixed time. So it is very difficult for online students to come to, e.g. room CL 201b, to take a proctored exam from 9 am to 11 am on a particular day. What many other institutions that offer online courses do is to ask students come to a testing center in a given period of time, say, from Monday to Wednesday, to do the test. Could York Testing Center provide such service? Another issue is that it takes too long to change students' *WN status. It may not affect a student who takes a face-to-face class. However, it greatly affects a student who takes an online course. In addition, newly hired faculty members have to wait for long time to access Blackboard system. This directly affects their instruction and students' learning if they need to use Blackboard. In order for faculty to have access to Blackboard, their information has to be entered into the CUNY First System by the HR. Is it possible to increase the speed of the hiring paper work process? There are many more examples. All indicate that online teaching and learning needs a system approach. To make it a successful experience for students, faculty and the College, we need to adjust the way not only we do teaching and learning, but also all support services from library, registrar's office, HR, advisement, academic support center, counseling, etc., as stated by Moore and Kearsley that "distance education is about change" (p. 20). It is also reflected from the Middle States guidelines (2011).

This requires that staff members working in these areas have the knowledge of supporting distance education and online learning and apply the best practices in their respective areas. One way to keep up with the rapidly changing higher education landscape is to engage in professional development activities. There are online courses on these topics. The internet has many good resources. The staff members should take advantages of the internet and acquire new skills to meet the 21st century challenge. Another way is to look for some one who has the educational background or experience in the respective area of distance education and online learning support when a support division needs to hire a new staff member.

The Role of the College Administration

As can be seen from previous sections, different departments in an institution have to work together to make online/hybrid and web-based teaching and learning successful. The College administration plays a

vital role in facilitating the changes that need to happen and ensure that all departments work collaboratively for the common goals. This requires that the College defines the strategic value of online/hybrid and web-based instruction in the mission, and builds governance structure for effective and comprehensive decision making related to online/hybrid and web-based teaching and learning. In The Sloan Consortium's quality scorecard it is recommended to "include all the institutional divisions that are likely to be involved in and/or affected by the decision making process for online and blended education." and "clarify responsibilities for and authorities over online and blended education for all stakeholders" (2011, p. 8). The administration's support is also reflected in the reward and promotion structure. As pointed out by Yang (2010) "tenure and promotion policies were considered very important for faculty to embrace online education". Although we can see from the faculty survey that many indicate their intrinsic motivation (challenge and creativity involved) is the main reason to teach online/hybrid courses, valuing and counting their talent, energy and time for online/hybrid and web-based, innovative instruction in the tenure and promotion process as well as monetary support could sustain their effort.

In addition, the administration should allocate adequate human and technology resources. For example, currently there are about 600 course sections using Blackboard with near 300 instructors. There is only one full-time staff member in Educational Technology Department to support them including Blackboard issues encountered by students, plus all instructional technology training, online/hybrid course development, student technology workshops, developing technology tutorials, and many more tasks listed above that need to be done. If the College wants to expand online/hybrid and web-based instruction, adding more staff members in the Educational Department is imperative.

Budgets

1. One full-time staff should be hired in Educational Technology department as Blackboard administrator so that the current full-time staff could have time to work on the items listed under faculty support and student support sections. The additional full-time staff member is critical to enhance the support to faculty and students in online/hybrid and web-based courses.
2. One part-time staff should be hired in Educational Technology department as a developer who will maintain and develop the WordPress MU system on campus.

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