LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS
Pathways Project Implementation Memorandum

TO: Laura Rittner, Executive Director, Success Center – OACC
FROM: Joe Argiro, Donhnall Godfrey, Melissa McCarthy, Ginna Witte
RE: Aligning Professional Development to Ensure Effective Online Teaching
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges to rapidly shift course delivery modalities from face-to-face to remote, online learning. Since spring 2020, many postsecondary students have now taken some or all of their courses virtually.

This shift to online learning could have dire consequences for historically marginalized and underrepresented students who are particularly impacted in online courses where there is little interpersonal interaction. A recent report by the Center for Education Policy and Evaluation warns: "There is considerable danger that moving vulnerable students online will widen attainment gaps." In this way, the pandemic could prove to be an "at-risk multiplier" for students who are already at greater risk of lower course completion rates, delayed time-to-degree, and stopping out of school altogether. Assessment of online learning outcomes is critical to ensure that marginalized students are not falling through the cracks, and providing targeted professional development is necessary so that faculty teaching online course sections have the tools they need to help all students succeed.

In OACC's 2018 Guided Pathways Scale of Adoption Assessment, most Ohio community colleges reported that the assessment of educational practice and the development of aligned professional development activities were not yet fully systematic (regardless of course modality). Presented with an opportunity to "meet the moment" and evaluate current trends in online course design and delivery, our implementation memo outlines the high-impact, evidence-based practices colleges should adapt to improve teaching and learning outcomes in online classrooms.

RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEWED & DATA EXAMINED

Online Enrollment and Course Success

An examination of national education statistics and state level data for each community college revealed sharp increases in enrollment in distance education between 2019 - 2021. In fall of 2019, a quarter (25%) of students enrolled in public, degree-granting institutions were enrolled in at least one

distance education course and 31% were enrolled exclusively in distance education. By 2020, the numbers of students enrolled in distance education shifted - the proportion of students enrolled in some distance education dropped to 20%, however enrollments exclusively in distance education doubled to 62%, representing more than 80,000 students. (https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=80)

The pivot to increased online learning raises questions about the efficacy of virtual modalities and the potential impacts on student learning outcomes and course success rates. The 2021 Online Pulse survey found that students exclusively enrolled in in-person courses rated them as meeting their educational needs higher than those only in online courses or a blend (59% in-person compared to 44% online and 49% blended). Despite students reporting that online learning modalities are not the way they learn best, 68% indicated they wanted options for fully-online courses to continue into the future due to the convenience and scheduling flexibility they provide.

A 2021 Brookings analysis reviewed research on online course success. This review found worse student performance in online courses versus in-person courses, including lower pass rates, higher withdrawal and failure rates, and negative impacts on student retention, persistence, and completion. Findings also raised major equity concerns in the access and ability to succeed in online courses among student subpopulations.

Professional Development for Online Education

In a survey conducted by EducationData.org, 75% of university and college presidents reported that their biggest challenge with the online switch in the Spring of 2020 was training faculty. Even as schools move past the abrupt educational changes induced by the pandemic, professional development in online education will continue to be a critical need.

The Educause Horizon's report (2022) compiled feedback from panels of experts in higher education, teaching and learning, and technology. As the panels reflected on the future of higher education, they noted that "investing the time and resources to ensure faculty are trained and equipped to effectively engage in hybrid and remote learning environments may be one of the easiest and highest-reward decisions an institution can make" (p. 33). Given the explosion of interest in online education, panelists felt that professional development in this area had the potential to deliver a huge impact on student success and learning.

This trend was reflected in the results from a survey of Ohio community colleges (conducted by this memo's authors). The survey revealed that most schools already have some level of dedicated support for online or "e-Learning" and faculty professional development. Of the 22 colleges that completed the survey, nearly all (n=18) confirmed that they have staff positions that support or supervise online education. Fifteen of the schools reported they have an administrator overseeing online education, either a dean or director level position, and nine of the schools reported having professional instructional designers on staff.

When asked about dedicated professional development support, thirteen of the colleges surveyed reported that they have an established Center for Teaching & Learning or equivalent department focused on developing and providing training to faculty and instructors. While the responses indicate that support is available at nearly half of the colleges, the breadth or extent of the professional development services provided was not covered. Further, it is possible that the colleges provide professional

development to faculty in some capacity that was not captured in survey responses, or that survey respondents were unaware of training offerings for faculty.

In the available literature, professional development is consistently pointed to as a critical part of higher education faculty and staff retention and satisfaction. This is highlighted by the 2017 survey from Academic Impressions which found that professional development had a significant impact on turnover and 7 in 10 respondents indicated that opportunities for professional development and training would increase the likelihood that they would stay at their current institution.

PROPOSED CHANGES/REFORMS TO BE ADOPTED

When it comes to ensuring effective online teaching and learning, assessment needs and preferences will vary by college based on the unique needs of the online student population. The proposed changes contained in this section can be adapted to benefit all colleges regardless of the student population or tenure of offering online courses.

Assessment

Overall, it is critically important that colleges are utilizing a continuous improvement framework to evaluate teaching and learning. The model of continuous improvement requires repeated cycles of evaluation as a means of program improvement. The following key steps are highlighted for the assessment process:

- **Disaggregate student success data and identify gaps in student outcomes:** The first step is to disaggregate student data. Student success data encompasses both course success rates (e.g. how many students are passing with a C or better) and at a more granular level, the individual course assignments and exam outcomes. The purpose of disaggregating the data is that it allows instructors, academic departments, and the institutional research office to identify gaps in student outcomes, such as: are success rates for the same course diverging between online and in-person modalities; or if gaps exist within student subpopulations such as Pell-eligible, adult learners, Black and LatinX students.

- **Reflect on instructional practices and available supports:** Once the gaps are identified, it is time to reflect the instructional practices in place at the institution. Are instructors encouraged and provided with training to implement evidence-based practices such as active and experiential learning, or inclusive or culturally responsive learning in online courses?

- **Review institutional policies:** Further, it is important to ensure that there is a policy framework that supports process changes for improved student learning at an institutional level. Do instructors have administrative discretion to be flexible on deadlines or offer alternative assignments that meet desired learning outcomes if students need it? Are expectations for effective teaching and learning clearly outlined in the hiring, performance review, and promotion processes?

Professional Development

Assessment findings should inform targeted professional development to shore up any identified gaps and ensure continued excellence in faculty instruction. Research shows that training must be high quality and sustained over time to be most effective. In the area of online instruction, the following key themes are highlighted due to their broad applicability to colleges working in the eLearning space.

- **Effective use of technology:** Online learning brings an extra layer of complexity in that faculty and students must navigate a technology platform in addition to teaching or learning course content. Actions like developing pre-course modules and embedding "how-to" guides throughout the course shell reduce cognitive burden on students so that they can focus on learning course content. Training for faculty to help get familiarized with the learning management system and new features can build confidence and promote seamless content delivery when the course launches.

- **Effective course design:** Training in this area will help faculty determine and build a syllabus with an appropriate course workload for online students. Further, training on appropriate layout and presentation standards for an online environment will help faculty as they modify and develop new content for online course shells.

- **Access and equity:** Professional development can help faculty center access and equity – making faculty aware that students may struggle with access to technology, ensuring accessibility standards are met, and increasing awareness of common forms of bias, e.g. representation bias in the images they use in course materials.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

As colleges move forward and bring assessment and targeted professional development efforts to scale, there are some challenges to consider.

- **Sustained, inclusive collaboration:** Since research shows that sustained professional development efforts are most effective, this work will take some time. Administrators, faculty, and staff must be patient and allow time for iterative assessment. This can be a challenge, especially when improved student outcomes are desired as soon as possible. Because this work can span many years, anticipate and plan for a variety of short-term (term to term), medium-term (year over year), and long-term outcomes (several years).

- **Respect for expertise:** This challenge acknowledges that efforts to improve outcomes in online learning require cross-divisional collaboration. When each contributors' expertise is not respected, process improvements can break down and stall. It is important that every group feels they are an equal partner who plays an important role, and that their insights are respected when brought to the table. While all faculty and staff contribute to student success in some capacity, the following groups are highlighted:
  - *Faculty* – it is important to include full-time and adjunct faculty since they play a key role in influencing student success. Faculty are the content experts in their discipline and they are tasked with a lot as instructors and the front-line staff engaging directly with students. Remember their expertise and recognize the additional burdens placed on faculty over the

past few years as they have worked to maintain high-quality content in a variety of modalities.

- o *Student Affairs* - Research indicates that what happens outside of the classroom impacts student learning. Strong relationships with Student Affairs staff are critical to meet students holistic needs, whether it be personal, financial, or career-related.
- o *Institutional Research* - The IR office plays an important role in gathering and making sense of data that guides reforms and new initiatives. Similarly, it is often the IR team that assists with evaluating the impact of initiatives on student success, so it is important to consider their analyses and recommendations.
- o *Students* - Ultimately students are at the heart of teaching and learning. As such, it is important that student experiences are considered when they report what is or is not working for them in online courses

- **Strategic Finance:** Budget is always a top concern, but if colleges want to scale efforts in improved online learning, there will be costs. Increasing the scale or frequency of professional development may entail contracting out for training services, providing faculty with release time or stipends to conduct training, hiring instructional designers, supporting a Center for Teaching and Learning, or updating learning management systems. As schools move forward in this work, consider the following: what is the possible return on investment if online learning outcomes can be improved, and how that might lead to higher shares of performance-based funding with improved success rates? Consider the return on mission when students are learning more in online classes, and what that could mean for improvements in overall persistence, retention, and credential completion. Finally, weigh the potential benefits against the cost of taking no action.

CONCLUSION

While online learning has been around for quite some time, the dramatic increase in virtual course enrollment since the COVID-19 pandemic is a driving force for institutions to assess their online course outcomes and professional development support for online teaching and learning. As an increasingly diverse student body seeks the continued flexibility offered by online learning modalities, it will be critically important for institutions to provide support and empower faculty to adapt high-impact practices that will improve online student success outcomes.

Institutions are encouraged to examine student outcomes at the individual skill level, as well as assess the larger online learning infrastructure to identify areas of improvement. Supporting student success requires targeted, high-quality professional development for faculty in the areas of online course design, pedagogy, and student engagement. Further, institutional policies and procedures around hiring, promotion, and classroom management should be assessed as to how effectively these practices meet the needs of students. Institutions should consider both the fiscal and moral imperative to engage in this work, as more students successfully passing courses will yield not only a return on investment through increased tuition and performance-based funding, but a return on mission as retention and completion rates are also likely to improve.

Annotated Bibliography of Key Resources

Banta, Trudy W., et al. *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*. 2nd edition, Jossey-Bass, 2014.

An explicit guidebook for how to plan, construct, implement, and utilize assessment in courses. There are chapters dedicated not only to the creation of assessment plans but also how to engage faculty in the assessment process. There are also chapters on assessing general learning outcomes, student affairs, and institutional effectiveness.

Barkley, Elizabeth F., and Claire H. Major. *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. 1st edition, John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

A collection of specific learning assessments with detailed instructions on how to implement them in multiple class modalities. It includes details pertaining to the collection and reporting of data regarding student performance.

Diamond, Robert M. *Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula: A Practical Guide*. 3rd edition, Jossey-Bass, 2008.

A foundational text in student centered course design. Diamond introduces an interdisciplinary approach to course design. The model utilizes a committee of faculty and administrators to ensure course effectiveness. While written with a traditional research institution in mind the Diamond notes that community colleges are leading the way in the assessment of learning. The model presented provides detailed time tables and work flow charts.

Fink, L. Dee. *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. Revised and Updated edition, Jossey-Bass, 2013.

Another key text in learning centered course design with specific advice toward assessing courses based on formative and summative assessments. While online courses are not a specific focus the principles of assessment presented here can be extrapolated to an online instructional environment. There is a direct link between learning outcomes and the kinds of assessment instructors select.

"OLT Community | OLT Faculty Development." *OLT Faculty*, https://www.oltfaculty.com/community. Accessed 17 Mar. 2022.

Described as a "higher education teaching & learning partner," OLT offers courses, workshops, and other training in professional development for faculty. These trainings can be accessed by individual faculty for a fee or an institution can work with OLT for onsite, or virtual workshops.

Teaching & Learning Toolkit: A Research-Based Guide to Building a Culture of Teaching & Learning Excellence | Achieving the Dream. https://www.achievingthedream.org/teachinglearningtoolkit. Accessed 17 Mar. 2022.

This should be a major source for us to use as needed. Chapters 4 and 5 in particular cover the importance of professional development for faculty and best practices for implementing development programs.

This resource is freely available and the OACC is offering another course in ATD's Community of Practice for Ohio Faculty Developers and Instructional Designers this Summer 2022. This is a very actionable first step for colleges to develop faculty excellence in online instruction.

Specifically, institutions in Ohio should develop a culture of being a "learning college." "a broad focus on trying out new approaches to learning and teaching and building on experiments that work. Colleges that function as adaptive learning organizations are more likely to survive and thrive in the new era..High impact professional learning can help colleges develop as adaptive learning organizations." (p. 114).

Wake Forest University. "Workload Estimator 2.0." *Center for the Advancement of Teaching*, https://cat.wfu.edu/resources/tools/estimator2/. Accessed 17 Mar. 2022.

An online tool for calculating student workload based on a number of factors including Class Duration, Readings, Essays, Exams, Discussion Posts, Videos and podcasts.

When designing courses faculty should consider what is feasible in the course timeline. Students will become discouraged when faced with an insurmountable workload.

These kinds of tools can serve as a model for how campuses can build their own library of course design and assessment tools.

Walvoord, Barbara E., and Trudy W. Banta. *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. 2nd edition, Jossey-Bass, 2010.

An effective and thorough guide to demystifying the assessment process. Assessment for multiple layers--course, program, general education-- are covered in clear actionable steps.