Project Details

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<th>Title</th>
<th>Quality of Distance and Online Learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>8-Planning Continuous Improvement</td>
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<td>Timeline</td>
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<td>Planned Project Kickoff</td>
<td>01-01-2012</td>
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1: Project Goal

A: The University of Rio Grande seeks to clarify and assess distance and online learning quality and process. Efforts will include, but are not limited to: Facilitating and training instructors, course design and development incorporating Quality Matters standards for best practice, and assessing and evaluating courses and course instructors including requiring a plan for accountability.

2: Reasons For Project

A: There has been no formal, established process for distance learning or online learning at the University of Rio Grande for several years. In the past, a distance learning committee reviewed and approved courses for distance education. With the need to develop several new programs for the distance learning market by the fall of 2012, several opportunities for management of these programs have surfaced. There is currently no formal approval process for courses that are developed for distance or online learning. There is no required training or certification for instructors to be qualified to develop and teach these courses, and there is no formal evaluation/assessment process for these courses. As a result, it is evident that there needs to be research into how to best administer and implement these distance and online programs.

3: Organizational Areas Affected

A: The College of Health and Behavioral Sciences is currently using distance learning for courses in several Nursing degrees. The School of Business within the College of Professional and Applied Studies, has an adult degree completion (adult studies) program designed for adult learners and will be taught evenings in hybrid format beginning fall 2012. Additionally, the School of Business is working with a large corporate partner to develop an adult studies program in hospitality management specific to the restaurant industry beginning fall of 2012. The hospitality program will require specific general education courses be converted to the adult learner, distance learning format. As a result, this program could impact many programs across campus requiring a better process for implementation and training.

4: Key Organizational Process(es)

A: This Action Project will conduct research, make recommendations, and implement solutions regarding improvements to the following key processes in respect to distance and online programs:

1. Online course design and development – Rio needs to develop a specific process for the design and development of new online/distance courses, as well as revisions / updates of existing courses, according to a set of measurable quality standards. In addition, a process for review and preapproval of such online/distance courses is necessary.
2. Faculty qualifications; training and evaluation – the project will establish experience and/or certification criteria for faculty who design and develop courses, training opportunities/requirements, and periodic measurement of effectiveness.
3. Course satisfaction and effectiveness evaluation – the project will incorporate a subsequent satisfaction review process intended to back-test learning effectiveness and student satisfaction with content and delivery.

5: Project Time Frame Rationale

A: The kickoff for this project is January 1, 2012. After faculty return from winter break, the action plan team will meet to determine specific areas of focus, develop training needs/qualifications for faculty, and to evaluate process to achieve the action plan goals.
(January-February, 2012). Once training needs have been identified, training will take place March through June, 2012. Once trained, faculty will review/revise courses (June to August, 2012) so the courses will be available for fall start (August 2012). During the fall semester, students and peers will evaluate the courses using the processes developed to assess the course and faculty. In January, 2013, the Action Project team will assess the process and make recommendations for additional changes including strategies for continuous improvement.

6: Project Success Monitoring

A: A team has been established to monitor the progress for this action project. According to the timeline above, check points are in place to monitor success. Additionally, the promise of having these courses developed by fall 2012 is also a checkpoint for progress. The team will meet regularly (probably bi-monthly) to monitor progress throughout the action project. The Action Project team will meet twice a semester with the Quality Assurance Council, a subcommittee of the AQIP Steering Team, to supply updates and receive feedback on the progress.

7: Project Outcome Measures

A: Outcome measures will include: the establishment of best practice standards and expectations for instructors at Rio Grande, the establishment of a required course of training for instructors teaching in the distance/online learning environment, the training tools to develop and design distance/online courses, the actual course development, and the means to evaluate the instructor and online/hybrid courses by the administration and students. The standards and processes developed by this action project will continue to be used by a review committee on an ongoing basis.

Project Update

1: Project Accomplishments and Status

A: At the October 21, 2012 Academic Affairs committee meeting, Dr. Darlene Ringhand presented the Quality of Distance and Online Learning (QDOL) Handbook for approval. A few faculty members had questions about some of the processes included in the handbook and, after some discussion, the committee voted to table the approval until those questions could be addressed. The QDOL team met with faculty who had concerns on November 7, 2012 and again on December 5, 2012 to discuss their concerns. Because of Dr. Ringhand’s absence from the November 21, 2012 Academic Affairs committee meeting, the QDOL discussion was tabled again.

At the January 16 Academic Affairs committee meeting, the QDOL Handbook was taken off tabled status and the committee discussed the changes. During the discussion, a faculty member suggested the handbook be sent to the Faculty Association’s attorney for review. There was general agreement and the Academic Affairs voted to table the handbook again until it could be reviewed by legal counsel. The QDOL team met again on January 31, 2013, to review recommended changes and finalize the handbook. After much discussion among committee members, they accepted the suggested changes and sent the final draft out to all concerned on February 4, 2013.

On February 7, 2013 Dr. Ringhand sent a link to the handbook posted on Rio’s intranet along with a request for members to review one final time. Committee members replied with their comments and recommendations and Dr. Ringhand and Dr. Lawrence, Associate Provost, made the final changes.

Between February 7 and April 2, 2013, Dr. Ringhand communicated via email with Dr. John Means, then Chair of the Faculty Association, regarding the attorney’s recommendations. Once the language in question was revised to satisfy all parties, Drs. Ringhand and Lawrence sent the final version to all QDOL team members and the Academic Affairs committee agenda packet to where it would be presented again to that committee. At the April 17, 2013 Academic Affairs committee meeting, the committee discussed the changes and adopted the handbook.

Although the process was slowed by a few faculty members who raised some concerns with some of the processes contained in the handbook, thus slowing down the approval process, it was a healthy discussion and one that has helped Rio articulate its policies and procedures for distance and online learning.
Institution Involvement

Everyone who participated in this action project was motivated by wanting to do what is in the best interest of the learner. This was evident even during discussions that centered on the method and frequency faculty should be available to communicate with students. Those involved with developing, reviewing, revising, and approving the QDOL Handbook communicated as much by face to face meetings as with email. The f2f meetings happened on a semi-regular schedule at the beginning of the project and then became as needed toward the end. Dr. Darlene Ringhand, the lead for this project, presented the first draft of the handbook to Rio’s Academic Affairs committee at their October 17, 2012 meeting, after which it was on every Academic Affairs committee agenda until its approval in April, 2013.

Next Steps

The Academic Affairs committee along with team members of the QDOL action project identified the following recommendations that Rio is addressing and/or implementing:

1. Develop an automated process to track faculty qualifications for online teaching.
2. Develop a rubric for online course monitoring based on the new handbook.
3. Determine the best method of having students evaluate online courses. (Rio addressed this as of the end of the spring 2013 semester. All students in all courses may now use CoursEval, Rio’s new online course evaluation system, to evaluate any course, no matter the format.)
4. Encourage a Faculty Development Day dedicated to Quality Matters training.
5. Recommend each School designate a trained QDOL faculty to assist with course evaluation and development. The faculty member so designated should be a mentor who uses constructive feedback as Quality Matters suggests.
6. Develop an ongoing Distance Learning committee. (Rio developed and instituted a Faculty Assembly beginning fall 2013 with standing committees including a Faculty Policy Committee that has, among others, a standing sub-committee on Distance Learning.)

After the review, Rio plans to complete this action project.

Resulting Effective Practices

When developing a new handbook, policy, or process, include as many stakeholders as possible to thoroughly vet the language. However, remember this will likely slow down the process.

Project Challenges

Rio does not anticipate any major challenges implementing the new handbook as it was vetted thoroughly through multiple stakeholders. Additionally, two of the six recommendations are already in place—Rio’s new CoursEval online course evaluation program and the new Distance Learning sub-committee of the Academic Policy Committee. Rio’s new Director of Human Resources is helping develop an automated method for tracking faculty credentials and development training. The new Distance Learning sub-committee will begin addressing the other recommendations.

Update Review

Project Accomplishments and Status

Rio Grande is to be commended for taking the time to allow the process the time for the healthy discussion so critical to final implementation allowing for better articulation its policies and procedures. According to the original timeline, the project appears to be slightly behind schedule for implementation. Now that the handbook has been approved, the institution may consider revising the timeline for full implementation.

Institution Involvement
It is apparent that this project was thorough vetted and faculty had ample opportunity for input. This thoroughness should pay dividends in terms of providing a consistent student interface regardless as to which distance or online course students are completing.

### Next Steps

Now that a list has been completed and the QDOL Handbook has been adopted, the College is poised and ready to build a timeline. In addition, the institution may want to consider the process owner for each of the steps.

### Resulting Effective Practices

The institution is to be commended for developing such a thorough handbook. Equally important will be establishing the process for faithful implementation, evaluation, and modifications which might be needed. The College may consider how to implement the project and how to develop a timetable that works for all stakeholders.

### Project Challenges

The institution appears confident that major challenges will not appear and has already put into place two of six recommendations. The tracking of credentials and the establishment of the sub-committee should greatly enhance this effort. It would be interesting to see if the methodologies developed for on-line courses can be utilized for seat based courses in order to ensure consistency across all instructional delivery methods.

### Project Outcome

#### REASON FOR COMPLETION

The objectives of developing guidelines, training, and a best practice handbook for online learning at the University of Rio Grande have been accomplished.

Training for Blackboard and Quality Matters is taking place on the RIO Campus and Meigs Campus. More training will be scheduled for Academic year 2013/14.

The Quality in Distance and Online Learning Handbook was approved by Academic Affairs on April 17th, 2013. This is a campus-wide approval.

#### SUCCESS FACTORS

These are examples of the Action Project's success:

- Training was identified and implemented for Blackboard
- Training was identified and offered for Adult Learners
- Training is ongoing for Quality Matters Rubric for faculty interested in teaching in the online environment
- The level of understanding of best practice for online educators has been raised with discussions in Academic Affairs, the Faculty Association and faculty in general.
- Recommendations to move forward are included.

#### UNSUCCESSFUL FACTORS

There were several less than successful aspects of this project. Additional education and training should be done to raise the awareness of the faculty at the University of Rio Grande to a better understanding of the dynamics and expectations of quality in online instruction. Gaining approval for responding to students five days per week was difficult with the constraints of a faculty
contract that states otherwise.

The continuation of the training and evaluation of online courses that will be developed cannot be guaranteed. However, the new Faculty Assembly has a Distance Learning Committee in its bylaws so that this effort to train and maintain quality in distance and online learning carries forward.