

Online Learning @ MCC
Madisonville Community College

It is the goal of the Madisonville Community College (MCC) Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) “to improve student engagement and success in an online learning environment.” MCC enrollment data show a significant increase in the number of students taking advantage of online learning opportunities over the past five years. In fall 2015, the number of duplicated enrollments in online sections comprised 46% of enrollment in all MCC course sections. That figure has increased steadily since the fall 2011 term when online duplicated enrollments comprised only 16% of the total. This shift in enrollment trends needs to be considered in light of the following – both MCC course completion data and national studies show that withdrawal and failure rates in online courses are significantly higher than in traditional face-to-face courses. Taken together, these data pose a difficult question: how can student success and credential completion rates be improved as demand for online learning opportunities increases?

Work undertaken during the college’s first QEP has prepared the college to address this issue. The first QEP focused on researching, adapting, and making widespread use of active learning strategies known to promote higher order thinking skills. At MCC that meant shifting the instructional paradigm from a lecture-dominant classroom to a more engaged classroom where students are asked to take on more responsibility for their own learning and where instructors are asked to make use of sound, research-based best practices to improve learning outcomes. It is fair to say that the work of the previous QEP has established – and continues to promote – a culture of active learning within the college. The challenge now is to make this pedagogy of engagement work in an online learning environment.

Current literature and research document a compelling need to address student engagement issues. Online learning theories consistently emphasize the critical role of interpersonal engagement and interaction in online courses. A recent study published by the Community College Research Center of Columbia University indicates that there is a positive correlation between the quality of interpersonal interaction and student success. The literature also shows, however, that the power of engagement in online and hybrid courses has yet to be realized. Increasingly faculty will be called upon to employ learning strategies and activities – including a variety of instructional technologies and software – to help students become more self-directed and more engaged with course content, the instructor, and their peers.

Faculty, with few exceptions, are in command of their subject matter, but many are underprepared to teach effectively in an online environment. Their graduate coursework is, understandably, discipline focused, often with little or no attention paid to pedagogy. Further, their experience, both as student *and* teacher, has probably taken place in a traditional lecture-based classroom. In light of the enrollment trends noted earlier, the challenge now is to create a more engaged online learning environment in online and hybrid (or blended) classrooms – one that enhances student access to postsecondary education without sacrificing quality and one that provides effective on-going academic advising and support services. In order to address this challenge, MCC established the following objectives to achieve the goal of the QEP:

1. Prepare students to be successful in an online environment.
2. Implement use of online engagement practices that improve student learning and persistence.
3. Implement a continuous improvement plan for design and delivery of online and hybrid (or blended) instruction.

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