

QEP Executive Summary

Quality Enhancement Plan: In-Sync: Improving Distance Learning, Support, and Success

Institution: Northwest-Shoals Community College

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It is no surprise that distance education is gaining popularity. Today's traditional sector of college students has grown up with regular access to technology and is increasingly reliant on it. For these students, distance education provides a comfortable, flexible learning environment. The flexibility of distance education is attractive to nontraditional college students as well. Students who are over 25, beginning college work for the first time or returning to college after an extended gap, have family responsibilities, or work full-time jobs, find distance education to be a realistic option for attaining higher education. Institutions of higher learning must continue to develop online programs in order to keep up with demand; however, increased distance course and program offerings will not ensure successful online learners.

The goal of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), *In-Sync: Improving Distance Learning, Support, and Success*, is to improve distance education student success through technological and social support and through enhanced course delivery. The QEP is based on six components:

1. **Distance Orientation:** Revise distance education orientation course. Students' readiness to participate in online courses will be assessed, and students will be required to complete specific orientation modules based upon the score of their assessment.
2. **Distance-specific Student Support/Services:** Increase number of support services, such as testing alternatives and remote advising, and improve awareness of and access to Smarthinking, the online tutoring program that Northwest-Shoals Community College (NW-SCC) provides for its students.
3. **Distance Success Coach:** Hire a distance education success coach to facilitate the logistics of supporting students in the distance education program and training existing personnel on how to better support the distance students. The coach will be instrumental in cultivating communication with the student population about resources available to them, keeping them on track with their distance courses, and maintaining records about their success.
4. **Technology:** Supply distance education faculty with up-to-date equipment to facilitate the growth and successful implementation of online programs. Resources, including webcams and microphones that are required to meet faculty needs and enhance course delivery will be made available. Additionally, on-campus computer labs will be added to both the Shoals and Phil Campbell campuses to serve students who do not have hardware, software, or internet access elsewhere.
5. **Professional Development:** Provide training for distance education faculty. Faculty must have the tools they need to deliver quality online content. Those tools are 1) updated hardware 2) training. The QEP requires that all faculty, including adjuncts, who teach online will participate in distance-specific professional development sessions at least twice a year. Additionally, current student success coaches and a new distance

student success coach must cross-train with each other in order to deliver quality support to all distance students.

6. **Quality Matters:** Evaluate courses through Quality Matters. Quality Matters is a non-profit, quality assurance organization which is a faculty-centered peer review process designed to certify the quality of online courses and online components according to an objective rubric. NW-SCC will have courses evaluated through Quality Matters in order to improve distance course consistency by ensuring that students have a similar experience across courses and disciplines in the distance education program.

The QEP's success will be measured in seven courses which the QEP development committee identified as having significant success gaps between the traditional (on campus) and distance sections for comparable courses (same instructor, same course). Those courses are Biology 103, Biology 202, Business 271, Sociology 200, English 102, English 271, and Math 112.

For students, the QEP will increase distance support services and resources including technology, access to technology, distance advising and tutoring, and testing alternatives. With respect to faculty, the plan will ensure access to the latest technology for use in their distance courses, will require annual professional development sessions to help them become more comfortable with the technology available, and will ensure that they learn to engage in the online learning environment.