

Grand Rapids Community College Visit #

REPORT OF A CHANGE VISIT

TO

Grand Rapids Community College
Grand Rapids, Michigan

February 6-7, 2012

FOR

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

Dr. Thomas Hamel, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Oakton Community College,
Des Plaines, IL 60016 (Chair)

Bruce Petrie, Carlsbad, NM

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Assurance Section

Part I: Context and Nature of Visit

Grand Rapids Community College is seeking approval to offer twelve degrees online. It thereby is requesting HLC's Percentage Bracket Two -- at least 5% but no more than 20% of degree programs offered online. From 2010-2015 the college is planning to increase the number of its online courses to 25%. Additionally, increases in Distance Learning are an AQIP Action Project to which the college has committed.

All twelve degrees are Associate's of Applied Science:

1. Applications Software
2. Business Administration
3. Computer Application Technology
4. Computer Applications
5. Computer Information Systems Programming
6. Digital Graphics Communication
7. Juvenile Services
8. Management & Supervision
9. Marketing
10. Unix System Administration
11. Web Design & Development
12. Web Technical Support

The visiting team consulted with the following personnel and stakeholders:

Assistant Manager, Customer Support
Associate Dean, Counseling, Advising, and Retention Services
Associate Dean for Instructional Support and Interdisciplinary Studies
Associate Director, Enrollment Center
Associate Provost
Dean of Student Affairs
Chief Information Officer
Coordinator of Business Tutorial Lab
Director of Distance Learning and Instructional Technologies
Director of Student Life and Interim Director of Admissions
Director of Institutional Research
Faculty (14)
Institutional Research employees (2)

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IT Manager, Enterprise Applications
Lead, Testing
Paralegal
President
Provost/Executive Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs
Students (4)
Support Desk Technician

Part II: Evaluation of Documentation Supporting Institution's Request for Change

A. Alignment with Institution

Grand Rapids Community College has a long and iterative history in Distance Learning, Alternative Delivery, and Online Learning. It began offering Telecourses in 1979 and progressed to cable TV delivery and other delivery modes in the 1980's and 1990's, thereafter transitioning to online delivery in the late 1990's. It is a member of the Educational Teleconsortium of Michigan (ETOM) and the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative (MCCVLC).

The college has been steadily preparing for the delivery of online degrees in several ways.

Instruction: It has created and implemented a full-featured faculty development course that prepares faculty for the special demands associated with online learning. The course covers a broad range of topics, including online course design, online pedagogies, emerging technologies, multimedia, and communications, and promoting interaction and collaboration among online students,. Faculty must successfully complete the course before beginning to teach online, so the course has in effect established a broad and effective baseline of understanding of the dynamics of online instruction. Faculty whom the team interviewed uniformly praised the course for its preparatory values and also for securing buy-in among colleagues for the quality, integrity, and consistency of online curricula with their face-to-face counterparts.

Human Resources: GRCC has allocated human resources in support of Online Learning. The Associate Dean for Instructional Support and Interdisciplinary Studies oversees programmatic aspects of Online Learning (Distance Learning and Instructional Technologies, or DLIT). He and his staff provide leadership for online learning throughout the college, and they coordinate with the academic departments and disciplines to ensure the integrity and consistency of online curricula with face-to-face curricula. The Associate Dean is assisted by a recently-hired Instructional Designer, who is assisting faculty with design concepts that not only improve existing courses, but concepts that influence the building of a course "from the ground up." In this way, GRCC is migrating to an online environment that is holistic and distinctive, and not simply adapted from the face-to-face environment.

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Professional Development: Once faculty have completed the preparation course for online instruction, they continue to exercise opportunities for development in online pedagogies. The college offers basic, intermediate, and advanced training in online teaching methods, technologies, and sound online design. This training is optional, recurring, and varied. For example, in Winter, 2012, faculty workshops range from “Blackboard Basics” to “Blogs, Journals, Wikis” to “Blackboard Mashups” and on up to “Collaborating Online for Student Success”; etc.

Physical Resources: IT infrastructure for online degrees is highly satisfactory and improving. Servers for Blackboard have ample capacity for existing and increased demand. Since 1 July 2011 they have operated at 99.986% “uptime,” which is basically at the widely recognized industry goal of 99.999%. It represents a marked improvement over previous percentages at GRCC. Faculty report that their office computers perform with sufficient speed and capacity, and students working at home report generally modest or negligible wait times as they navigate within Blackboard (including all-important timed tests). For those who wish to pursue their online coursework on campus, the college provides students widespread access to computers on campus.

Student Services: GRCC has made good progress in providing extensive student services in online formats. These include admissions, registration and enrollment, limited tutoring (via Blackboard Instant Messaging), early alert monitoring, and library services.

Mission: Finally, but most essentially, Online Learning seamlessly supports GRCC’s Mission in that it fully aligns with Section 2.0: “GRCC minimizes barriers of time, place, cost, and educational preparation levels so that all members of the community have an opportunity to participate in college programs.” And, specifically, Strategy 2.2.1: “Expand the distance learning program (course offerings, quality, accreditation, and faculty certification.”)

B. Capacity for Implementing and Sustaining the Change

As indicated in the previous section, Grand Rapids Community College has been developing and supporting its various “infrastructures” (human, pedagogical, technological, professional) for online learning for better than a decade. It has done so because of student demand for online learning on a course-by-course basis, and it has progressively enhanced the quality of the learning experiences in these courses. It is now at the point where it makes sense to seek approval for the delivery of online degrees.

DLIT provides and markets GRCC’s distance delivered programs. The department is staffed by a Director and Instructional Designer and has the responsibility to provide professional development to all faculty who use technology in their courses. DLIT also monitors the quality of online courses and programs. Interviews with faculty, staff and students reveal that the

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department is doing a good job of certifying faculty in distance learning; however faculty expressed concerns about the monitoring of the content of distance courses. At the present time, any course that is placed online has the course template, but not the course content, monitored. Faculty members suggested that in cases where an online course has multiple sections taught by multiple instructors there is a strong probability that, depending on the instructor, the rigor of the course varies greatly. The recommendation to rectify this situation is to monitor the content of the various sections of the courses. This will ensure quality and consistency for this delivery method.

GRCC's structures have evolved in such a way that they provide strong support for online learning and online degrees, but they also maintain an integral alliance with the college's academic departments, disciplines, and reporting lines. Although DLIT is its own organizational unit, the team saw evidence that it works closely with academic departments throughout the college. Online faculty report to their respective deans and are subject to the same policies and procedures as faculty who teach face to face classes. DLIT markets its programs, but its Director is a member of Deans' Council, thereby ensuring good communication and alignment of online curricula with their face to face counterparts. DLIT also works closely with Information Technology to ensure that technical support and innovation progress hand in hand with academic support and innovation. DLIT is thus "layered on to" existing college policies and procedures, avoiding competition with or departure from them.

At the present time few adjuncts teach online; however, the directive from GRCC's President is that 25% of all courses will be available online by 2015. Currently 9% of the college curriculum is available online, so for the goal to be reached the college needs to consider the optimal mix between full-time and part-time faculty who teach online.

Anticipating future development of online courses in degrees, the college hired the aforementioned Instructional Designer in summer, 2011. Additionally, a Curriculum Specialist was hired in December, 2011.

Online Tutoring: GRCC provides some tutoring to online students via Blackboard instant messaging, practice tests, Study Mate, asynchronous tutoring, and faculty office hours. However, its online tutoring is not yet of sufficient equivalence or comparability to its face-to-face tutoring services. Given the limited and focused range of its online degrees, the college can ramp up its online tutoring services so that they fit the targeted needs of its online students.

C. Strategies for Monitoring and Evaluating the Change

Grand Rapids Community College has in place an annual review process that ensures adequate review of existing programs and consideration of new curricula. The Deans evaluate the relevance and strengths/weaknesses of each program according to

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defined criteria. Using the New Program Approval Process, they also use another set of criteria to determine whether new curricula will meet the needs of students. Online degrees will appropriately be subject to these very procedures.

The college is already gathering assessment data for its online curricula, and these data are subject to the same standards and reviews as assessment data for face-to-face curricula. Although the collection methods may vary – because of the nature of the delivery of online curricula – the results are analyzed comparably and regularly.

At this time, GRCC is not seeking approval of an online AA or AS, and assessment has actually played a role in the decision not to seek this approval. The college is currently reworking its institutional (Gen Ed) outcomes, and it is thus working towards a new plan for the measurement of assessment of these outcomes. It is thus premature to seek approval for online AA and AS degrees.

D. Strategies for Addressing Strengths, Challenges, or Strategic Issues, especially those previously identified by the Commission, as they Relate to the Change

Institutional Research and faculty have identified a persistently lower success rate among online students. (Initially, the number of underperforming online students was too low to be reliable, but the underperformance has now continued through multiple semesters of data.) Although the team encountered a small number of individuals who noted that such shortfalls in completion and persistence are common, possibly (to their thinking) even inevitable in online curricula, the great majority of faculty, staff, and administrators recognize that this is an important challenge that needs to be addressed. The college is identifying strategic approaches that will reduce and eliminate the difference. The team's commentary in Advancement provides advice on these topics.

GRCC prepares its faculty for online instruction with a five-week state of the art course. It would do well to consider some form(s) of preparations for its online students. See Advancement for counsel and practices at other institutions.

Whatever the college plans, let it be strategic and measurable. It is essential that the college address these performance deficiencies fully and forthrightly. (It is not possible to accredit a delivery method for which the college knowingly accepts a lower standard of student learning outcomes.)

Practices for authenticating the identities of students are adequate for those taking tests on campus. Students provide photo identification for on-campus testing. Practices for authenticating students at off-campus sites need improvement. Currently, faculty members are charged with working with off-campus sites to verify the identities of students taking tests and exams. As a result, the college does not have a reasonably uniform and consistent standard for insuring academic integrity and averting fraud with

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off-campus enrollment and testing. Effective practices at other institutions generally place these responsibilities with staff members, who use such techniques as photo identification, address verification, use of inexpensive web cameras, and similar protocols.

There are many and appropriate forms of support for copyright compliance. Library liaisons update academic departments on copyright issues, and librarians also make presentations on copyright issues at Faculty Learning Days. Faculty also sign a waiver form, indicating that they take responsibility for copyright compliance in their courses.

E. Potential Positive or Negative Effects of the Change

None observed or foreseen.

F. Quality Standards

It is evident that Grand Rapids Community College takes a careful and responsible approach towards Online Learning. Its change request is limited to twelve Career and Technical degrees. Via assessment data, program review, and evaluation of specific online courses (major reviews quadrennially; minor reviews annually), GRCC maintains reasonable quality standards for its online curricula, and these quality standards are cross-checked with face-to-face curricula.

The Associate Dean and Department Chairs evaluate online courses on a regular basis. In addition, team members were temporarily enrolled in ten online courses and determined that their methodologies and practices were consistent with strong and effective teaching and learning techniques. Assignments were clear, expectations were generally articulated in a clear manner, and faculty used effective and regular communication techniques with students.

Part III: Recommendation and Rationale

A. Recommendation

The team recommends approval for the authority to deliver the twelve requested online degrees. The team recommends approval for authority to deliver up to 20% of programs by distance delivery.

B. Rationale for the Team's Recommendation

Grand Rapids Community College has been evolving towards the delivery of online degrees for years. It has the curricula in place to support online degrees. It has a

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history of supporting professional development, both technical and pedagogical, to support the development and revision of online instruction. It has defined and maintained quality standards. It has the technological resources necessary to support the delivery of online degrees.

C. Other Accreditation Issues

None.

Part IV: STATEMENT OF AFFILIATION STATUS

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ADVANCEMENT SECTION

I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

None.

II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

Uniformity of presentation: As they move towards online degrees, many institutions rely on a reasonably standard template for every course. For example, learning outcomes are always listed in the same place, assessment and grading criteria are always in the same place, as is faculty contact information, etc. Students pursuing 100% online degrees thus find similar information in familiar places and are obliged to make as few adjustments as possible as they progress from one course to another. The team's review of a sample of current online courses revealed that virtually all of them include such information, but these data sets are scattered in different places (some have their own headings on home pages, some are included in a syllabus, some are in different places on syllabi, some are buried in a sentence well within a paragraph, etc.)

Copyright Compliance: Given the primacy of copyright compliance, many colleges offering online degrees offer (or require) rotating or occasional internal copyright reviews. These can be helpful, supportive, and valuable experiences for faculty, who are already dealing with the challenges of a new course structure, new delivery methods, etc. Certainly the college will want to hold itself to the same high standards to which its instructors holds their students.

Underperformance of online students: A variety of approaches is available to the college, including:

Online Preparation and Qualification -- The college can develop FAQ's, Q & A, video, multimedia, and peer advising in order to screen online students. It should also review the impression many faculty have that online sections become the sections of choice to students who are registering late in the registration cycle. Some institutions require a minimum GPA (subject to appeal) for registration in online courses.

Early Alert – This is already in place at GRCC, at least partially. (It is in the first year of implementation.) GRCC uses Starfish Early Alert in order to notify students who have not logged on for seven days. The college has collected data on this system; however those data are not being fully utilized in a manner that will aid in student retention. For example, the Starfish alert is dismissed if a staff member in student services contacts the student. The college plans to make more effective use of the software it now has in place.

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Course Design – As in face to face classes, students who are social and collaborative and interdependent online are less likely to fall behind or lose engagement with content. Designing these features into a course at the outset can help create the sense of an online community, and faculty play key roles in sustaining this throughout the term.

Hybridization – An emerging and fairly distinctive trend points to hybrid (combining online and face to face experiences) curricula producing the highest rates of student success and in-course persistence.

Authentication: As discussed in Assurance, the college can easily require photo identification for off-campus testing. It can also regularly confirm the addresses of students testing off site. There still remains the challenge of students doing some or all of their testing on their own computers. Some institutions, notably Grand Canyon University, supply webcams required for all at-home testing. The better cameras provide a wide angle view, and students can be required to provide a 360-degree pan of their personal testing space before beginning to test. (Issuance of a final grade or transcript can be conditioned on the return of the camera.) Typically, staff, not faculty, bear responsibility for these procedural details. Then, too, faculty themselves can require more secure testing and assessment techniques when, for example, student writing improves radically, mathematical calculations go from weak to strong, etc.

Copyright Audit: Although GRCC provides adequate training and updates for copyright procedures and changes, as an institution it does little or nothing to verify compliance. Instead, it assumes faculty stay informed and observant. A random or rotating copyright audit that is supportive and educational would strengthen institutional procedures and potentially provide protection from errors and/or adverse actions.

Continuous Quality Improvement: In order to maintain such quality, it should consider a recertification process for its online courses. Rapidly emerging technologies and tools – Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and online tutoring did not exist seven years ago – also speak on behalf of regular reviews of the techniques and technologies used in online courses.

Help Desk: GRCC is exploring a collaboration with nearby Davenport University to expand its Help Desk to 24/7 service. Either this or a standalone Help Desk will be a worthwhile addition to student services for online degrees. Utilization will be very easy to measure.

III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PROGRESS, AND/OR PRACTICES

GRCC has an emerging Best Practice in the five-week course all online faculty must complete before teaching online. The course is well-designed, well-received, universal,
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and it provides a superb start for online faculty.

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*Staff Recommendations for the
STATEMENT OF AFFILIATION STATUS*

INSTITUTION and STATE: Grand Rapids Community College, MI

TYPE OF REVIEW (from ESS): Change Visit

DESCRIPTION OF REVIEW (from ESS): Request to initiate distance delivery

DATES OF REVIEW: 2/6/12 - 2/7/12

No Change in Statement of Affiliation Status: _____

Nature of Organization

LEGAL STATUS: Public

RECOMMENDATION: No change.

DEGREES AWARDED: A

RECOMMENDATION: No change.

Conditions of Affiliation

STIPULATIONS ON AFFILIATION STATUS: None.

RECOMMENDATION: No change.

APPROVAL OF NEW ADDITIONAL LOCATIONS: Prior Commission approval required.

RECOMMENDATION: No change.

APPROVAL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION DEGREES: The institution has not been approved to offer its degree programs or more than four of its certificate programs through distance education or correspondence education as defined in Commission policy. Commission policy does permit the institution to offer up to four certificate programs as well as a limited number of courses leading to degree programs through distance education or correspondence education without seeking prior approval.

RECOMMENDATION: The institution has been approved under Commission policy to offer up to 20% of its total degree programs through distance education. The processes for expanding distance education are defined in other Commission documents.

REPORTS REQUIRED: None

RECOMMENDATION: No change.

OTHER VISITS REQUIRED: AQIP Quality Checkup: 2013 - 2014; ; Change Visit: 2011 - 2012;
Request to initiate distance delivery

RECOMMENDATION: No change.

Summary of Commission Review

Staff Recommendations for the
STATEMENT OF AFFILIATION STATUS

YEAR OF NEXT SYSTEM APPRAISAL: 2008 - 2009

RECOMMENDATION: No change.

YEAR OF NEXT REAFFIRMATION OF ACCREDITATION: 2014 - 2015

RECOMMENDATION: No change.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILE

INSTITUTION and STATE: Grand Rapids Community College, MI

TYPE OF REVIEW (from ESS): Change Visit ___ No change to Organization Profile

Educational Programs

		Program Distribution	Recommended Change (+ or -)
Programs leading to Undergraduate	Associate	111	
	Bachelors	0	
Programs leading to Graduate	Masters	0	
	Specialist	0	
	First Professional		
	Doctoral	0	

Off-Campus Activities

In-State: Campuses: Additional Locations: Course Locations:	Present Activity: None Grand Rapids (Grand Rapids Community College - Occupational Training/Tassel MTEC) ; Holland (Grand Rapids Community College - Holland/Lakeshore Campus/Thompson MTEC) None	Recommended Change: (+ or -)
Out-of-State: Campuses: Additional Locations: Course Locations:	Present Wording: None None None	Recommended Change: (+ or -)
Out-of-USA: Campuses: Additional Locations: Course Locations:	Present Wording: None None None	Recommended Change: (+ or -)

Distance Education Programs:

Present Offerings:

Associate - 11.1003 Computer and Information Systems Security/Information Assurance (Computer and Information Systems Security) offered via Internet

(These are the 12 programs that the change request listed specifically. No CIP codes were included.)

Applications Software
Business Administration
Computer Application Technology
Computer Applications
Computer Information Systems Programming
Digital Graphics Communication
Juvenile Services
Management & Supervision
Marketing
Unix System Administration
Web Design & Development
Web Technical Support

Recommended Change:

(+ or -)

Correspondence Education Programs:

Present Offerings:

None