

**Fitchburg State University**  
**Strategic Planning White Paper**  
**Technology Working Group**  
**November 15, 2014**

**Charge:**

This Working Group of the SPC is responsible for addressing the financial and technical challenges and opportunities related to Fitchburg State University's current and future developments to enhance the University's capacity to use technology to achieve the mission of the University and benefit its stakeholders (e.g. alumni, donors, government personnel, students, faculty, administration, staff, community partners, and prospective students and their parents).

**Key Issues/Questions:**

The working group began with these questions, from which the strategic objectives emerged:

- Should we have a more systematic plan for the future number and types of online classes that the university will offer? What should that plan look like?
  - What brand do we want for the university (i.e. online courses/programs, distance learning, blended/hybrid, etc.)?
- Define new and more effective metric mechanisms as well as methods of communication, especially taking into consideration what a "future student" will look like.
  - What instructional technologies are being used by faculty? Are faculty aware of current instructional technologies?
  - How much of the faculty feels that technology is fully integrated into their pedagogy?
  - How are faculty supported in considering pedagogical theories and applications of instructional technologies?
  - Is there a pattern of increasing demands for technology support from the academic programs of the University?
  - What information do we need to know about online and distance learning courses?
  - What technologies are students using/preferring to use/going to use?
- What direct primary challenges do students and faculty encounter in the current implementation of digital and online instructional modes? What methods are currently in place to address those challenges and how have they historically been assessed?

**Process:**

This Working Group of the SPC was formed in the Spring of 2014 with membership formed of members of the administration, union-appointed faculty (including the Working Group Chair), and a student volunteer. Members have included: Kisha Tracy (Chair, Faculty), Charles Roberts (Faculty), Peter Staab (Faculty), Jason Simon (Librarian), Steve Swartz (CIO), Michael Leamy (Director, Distance Learning), and Jennifer Lyon (Student). The Group met monthly in the

Summer of 2014, discussing its charge and revising the accompanying set of central questions. After open forums at the September University Development Day, meetings have continued weekly during the Fall of 2014. All meetings have been publicized to the campus, and minutes have been posted after each.

### **Strategic Objectives:**

The three central objectives from this Working Group are that the University, over the next five years, should:

- regularly assess the status of online learning (in all modalities) to determine if we are meeting the needs of current and future student populations as well as making available the tools needed to provide those services;
- promote and encourage a culture of experimentation and innovation with instructional technologies through operational and structural improvements, supportive commitments, and academic initiatives; and
- re-evaluate the current standard of the digital literacy of our students and institute a regularly-assessed method of ensuring that our students are adequately prepared for learning on our campus as well as the world they are entering post-graduation.

### **Detailed Strategic Objectives:**

#### ***Objective 1***

*Summary:* “The Students of the Future,” part of the Presidential Innovation Papers published in 2014, states that “higher education must ‘embrace the change the digital revolution is bringing.’ Any institution that thinks it is immune from that change may find itself obsolete” (p. 1). We as a University must be mindful of changes in higher education, as evidenced by the fact, that according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac of Higher Education 2014*, 8% of college freshmen entering four-year public colleges expect to take a course exclusively online. These statements highlight the need for universities to assess its philosophy about and implementation of online learning in all of its modalities. This assessment should be done deliberately, holistically, and as an institution, being mindful of R. DeMillo’s (2011) assertion that “technology has to focus on value creation” and should “enable universities to provide the education that is needed” (p. 276) as well as A.P. Kelly and F.M. Hess’s (2013) caveat that “technology that is simply grafted onto existing models can just as readily inflate costs and prop the status quo” rather than “deliver real innovation in quality and cost” (p. 11).

Fitchburg State offered its first online courses in 1998 with 12 courses. In the five years following, offerings were limited while the university considered and tested course learning management systems and approaches to course development. In 1999, the university purchased Blackboard (at that time called CourseInfo) for our learning management system and still uses Blackboard today. In 2006 there was significant growth with 48 courses offered online. The following year there were 99 courses offered online. During this period, to help support the interest and growth in online offerings, the University hired a part-time distance education coordinator whose main responsibilities were to support faculty in course design, provide

faculty training, and oversee a process to ensure quality. It quickly became evident that this position was vital to the university's online future, and the position became full-time in 2007.

The University launched its first two online programs, the Master of Business Administration and the Master of Science in Forensic Nursing, in 2008. We have since added the following degrees: Bachelor of Science in Nursing, Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, six tracks of the Masters of Education in Special Education degrees, three graduate certificate degrees, and two undergraduate certificate degrees. As of spring 2014, there have been 374 unique courses developed, approved, and offered online by the University. In 2013- 2014 alone, the University offered more than 600 online/hybrid courses with over 7800 enrollments.

*Recommendation:* At present, our approach as an institution to online learning has mostly been located in GCE and been developed on an individual basis, driven by departments or interested faculty, but not the institution. We recommend that the University initiate a deliberate, holistic, institution-wide discussion concerning how online learning should develop at the University, including identifying in what areas it may indeed not be advantageous. In the short-term, this will potentially include creating a committee, comprising members of all departments and all relevant parties on campus. In the long-term, the recommendations of this committee should be considered and implemented.

*Conclusion:* The University, over the next five years, should regularly assess the status of online learning (in all modalities) to determine if we are meeting the needs of current and future student populations as well as making available the tools needed to provide those services.

### **Objective 2**

*Summary:* In his presentation at the University's Development Day in September 2014, George Mehaffy, the Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, stressed the need for universities to encourage experimentation and even the potential failures that can result from such innovation. "Beyond the Inflection Point: Reimagining Business Models for Education" (2014) states that "[t]echnology offers avenues for transformation. Technology offers powerful solutions for rethinking higher education. The hybrid course, blending online learning with class time, is a good case in point" (p. 3). Indeed, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac of Higher Education 2014*, the number one goal of IT administrators for the next two to three years is to "help faculty members integrate technology into teaching" (79% rated very important).

DeMillo (2012) comments that it is "within the power of technology to deliver personalized experiences" and that the advancement of educational technology "points to a renewed quest for a more tailored, individualized approach to higher education." He encourages "a culture of sharing and accessibility in which students are able to use the technology to develop deep and personal ties to instructors and fellow learners." Such an approach to instruction is in line with the mission of Fitchburg State University.

*Recommendation:* In discussing this recommendation, it became clear that, in order to foster this environment of experimentation and innovation, the University will need a layered approach to provide support in the form of a centralized Office of Instructional Technology, release time, initiative funding, and publication and scholarship recognition opportunities. Such an approach could include:

- Short-term: the hiring of an additional instructional technologist, the creation of course releases for the development of technology-enhanced courses, the creation of grants for the development of technology-enhanced courses, the increased visibility of work completed by instructors in this area
- Mid-term: the development of a technology teaching and learning institute for instructors, an increase in the number of course releases and grants for the development of technology-enhanced courses
- Long-term: the creation of an Office of Instructional Technology, the development of a peer-reviewed publication highlighting the work of instructors in this area

*Conclusion:* The University, over the next five years, should promote and encourage a culture of experimentation and innovation with instructional technologies through operational and structural improvements, supportive commitments, and academic initiatives.

### ***Objective 3***

*Summary:* In 1996, Fitchburg State's Task Force on Academic Affairs –Technology Report recommended that the Academic Computing and Media Services (ACMS) be tasked with serving as “a catalyst in the development of computer literacy throughout the college campus.” In 2001, the Advisory Committee for ACMS, in anticipation of an approaching NEASC accreditation visit and in response to Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE) directives, pursued “developing a Technology Literacy definition for students, finding an appropriate assessment measure and ensuring that sufficient technology infrastructure is available on the FSC campus.” The resulting Digital Literacy requirement was established as a departmentally determined course requirement, in which each major specified an individual course to ensure a student met the minimum level of digital literacy at graduation. The intention was to make sure students were prepared for post-graduation challenges. In a 2008 AUC proposal addendum to the 2007 AUC update to the campus LA&S curriculum, the previous computer literacy requirement for students was retained without revision. This standard is without consideration of the recent innovations in instructional technology and the need for students to have digital literacy skill sets from the beginning of their academic career on campus rather than just upon graduation.

Instructional technology, social media, and online educational modes have become critical assets for the academic community. The varying level of digital literacy in the student body frequently forces faculty to engage in technology instruction during valuable classroom time that could be better focused on course content. This becomes particularly acute with the growing implementation of differing forms of online learning, in which simply participating and accessing course materials implicitly requires a minimum level of digital mastery.

At the current moment, there is no identified level or institutional method of ensuring that students are prepared for course work that may involve digital tools from their beginning semesters at Fitchburg State. There is no standard measure or assessment to determine whether a student enrolling in a course has a mastery of any of the range of skills that may be called into usage in the digitally-enabled classroom, which can require instructors to commit valuable time teaching the instructional technology, time which could be better spent teaching the course content.

*Recommendation:* Our recommendation is that the current method of meeting the student digital literacy requirement be replaced as it does not address the actual issues facing our students and faculty. To do so, in the short-term, a committee will need to be formed to propose an institutional change to the Digital Literacy Requirement, subject to approval through governance. Some options for this alteration might include a minimum skill set baseline, a requirement earlier in the curriculum, and/or a major-focused requirement, given that students need both a general digital literacy as well as major-specific mastery. In the mid- to long-term, a technology-readiness requisite should be instituted before students are allowed to enroll in courses of certain online modalities. This requisite could be satisfied through a self-paced module. In the long-term, the digital literacy needs of our students should be regularly assessed in order to modify these requirements accordingly.

*Conclusion:* The University, over the next five years, should re-evaluate the current standard of the digital literacy of our students and institute a regularly-assessed method of ensuring that our students are adequately prepared for learning on our campus as well as the world they are entering post-graduation.

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