FLVC FLORIDA VIRTUAL CAMPUS

The Quality Enigma

As In the education arena, there are a few words or labels that you can use that will almost instantly garner attention and possibly polarize a room. One of those is "quality." The word has little precision in its common use and often does more to obfuscate than clarify. The discussion can be about course, program, faculty, or institutional quality. Any comparisons, questions or concerns about "quality" will certainly garner a response. In more recent times, we have seen this in discussions about online course or program quality. But before I go down that road, let's look at a few basic points.

The main badge of a "quality" college or university has typically been accreditation. Once concerns about the quality of educational institutions were raised, procedures were put in place for the review and assurance of quality by regional or national entities empowered with the ability to empanel teams to visit campuses and conduct such reviews. If everything passed muster, the badge of accreditation was awarded. Thus, any institution would have passed the quality test if accreditation by a professional (in the case of a program), regional or national entity was awarded as a result of a formal review process. Those of us who work inside of an accredited college or university know that overall, the process works pretty well for us yet there can be instances where a program or course may experience some problems. My point is that no one is perfect and there are situations where we might say, "That is not a quality (you fill in the blank)!"

With the rise of distance learning, concerns over the "quality" of the courses and programs emerged early on as faculty were trying to figure out how to employ some of the new technologies for instruction. Some of the early converted correspondence courses or so called "talking head" recorded lecture-based courses were not our finest hour. As a result, what we have today are a number of rubrics and tools designed to help us assure and demonstrate "quality" in our distance learning programs. I am proud to say that those of us in the distance learning space take this issue very seriously as do our governing authorities. So, as you know, in Florida we have embarked on efforts to review and utilize quality and high-quality designations for courses that have been reviewed using one of several design focused rubrics. This effort has resulted in a very useful ongoing discussion about the instructional design of distance learning courses so that they can be more engaging and effective. Considerable initial and ongoing effort has been devoted to achieving the highest "quality" for distance learning courses. Some have asked if the same can be said for face-to-face courses and it is a fair point. Looking over the headlines in the last 10 years, most would have to agree that there has probably been more written about quality and cheating in distance learning courses and programs than about their classroom-based siblings. Yet, I think we can also agree that problems of quality and academic integrity exist regardless of the mode of instructional delivery despite the existence of entire industries and product families designed to mitigate those risks. My point being that distance education has unfairly borne the larger burden to prove itself in these discussions when all are equally challenged.

Let's look at "quality" in academia another way. If an institution has received accreditation by a regional or national accreditor, there is an assumption that the institution and its programs have achieved a certain baseline of "quality" in all of its offerings. That being the case, the albatross of achieving "quality" in the eyes of peers and consumers is somewhat satisfied. What then, is the purpose or place of such rubrics and tools as Quality Matters or the Online Learning Consortium Scorecard? Perhaps the critical and important role is about continuous evaluation and improvement. Or perhaps it is about the maintenance of "quality" in the face of continuous change. Course and program content change. Faculty teaching the course may change. The technologies used to deliver the instruction will change or be augmented. The outcomes of the course may need to change to match the needs of graduates and employers. A course or program of study is a collection of many dynamic parts which will change and, as a result, so can the "quality" if some maintenance processes are not in place. To anyone who has ever been involved in a program review process, there is nothing new here except perhaps a different lens.

I would argue that what we are trying to do is establish regular review procedures for a course or program that is using a unique form of delivery. That form of delivery requires some different considerations in terms of instructor skills, support services, policy parameters, content preparation and technological infrastructure, yet the overall goal is to evaluate and improve the course or program beyond the quality baseline of that already awarded to a college or university by an accrediting body. So, back to where I started. Let's demystify this fascination with "quality" and the use of the term in distance learning and perhaps think of it as just program or course review. Once all of the distance learning courses have been reviewed for "quality" and received their badges, all of the next steps will be about course review. In other words, the continuous evaluation and improvement of courses over some cycle – say perhaps three or five years as in the Quality Matters rubric. Each college or university will establish its own cycle and set its minimum standards that each course would need to achieve to maintain its standing. Perhaps some will be retired, many will be rebuilt to take advantage of new technologies or resources and others will be revered for finding new and innovative ways to deliver highly effective and engaging instruction. Like many of you, I look forward to the time when the discussion is more about the continuous improvement of online courses as a journey instead of one where we talk about course "quality" as a final destination to be reached. According to your last SACSCOC visit, you have already arrived.

Interview with Dr. Brian K. Marchman

Dr. Brian K. Marchman serves as Assistant Provost and Director for the Division of Distance Learning at the University of Florida. Previously, he was a senior leader at the Florida Virtual School, the nation's largest and most successful online public school. Dr. Marchman is the incoming chair of the FLVC Members Council on Distance Learning and Student Services.

What are your responsibilities as director of Distance Learning at the University of Florida and tell us about your previous leadership role with the Florida Virtual School?

"I am charged with providing strategic leadership and oversight for UF's distance learning unit, which includes nearly 200 self-supporting online graduate programs, the *Distance Education Service Center (DESC)*, *UF Flexible Learning*, *UF Dual Enrollment*, and enterprise-wide online proctoring services.

As a senior director at the Florida Virtual School, I held several administrative positions with varying levels of responsibility, including director roles in both student services and student experience, as well as school principal. While a leader at FLVS, I founded the first-of-its-kind, award-winning virtual teaching internship program in collaboration with UF and other Florida universities. Teacher development is one of my professional passions."

What is your vision for the goals and value of the Members Council in the year ahead?

"My goals for the Members Council are to attain full engagement by each State University System (SUS) and Florida College System (FCS) member representative, to effectively leverage FLVC member institutions' student enrollment volume for more favorable statewide vendor contracts, to advocate for state policies and regulations that advance high quality, accessible, and affordable online learning, and ultimately, to promote best practices in high quality online teaching."

What will be your primary areas of focus be during your year as chair of the Council?

"I plan to focus on two issues during my year of service as chair. The first is ensuring online academic integrity, which has become even more important over the past year or so as online course and test administration have rapidly increased, far beyond the expected rate. I'm looking forward to working with my colleagues on the Council to identify and promote best practices and solutions around this issue.

I also intend to lead an effort to modernize the DLSS Member Council's by-laws.
One of my goals for my year as chair is to fully engage every SUS and FCS member representative, which I believe can be accomplished by revisiting our by-laws. As it currently stands, there are primary representatives and secondary or alternate representatives from each institution identified in the by-laws. In my experience, this has led to the development of a hierarchy that minimized the influence and impact of the alternate representative. My philosophy is that we should seek the full participation and engagement that our colleagues are willing to give.

Regardless of whether they are a primary or an alternate, we should value the leadership and hard work of our members. For example, previously, only primary representatives could chair committees, and I would like to raise some questions about that. In online learning and in distance learning, due to our inherent collaborative nature and our rapid growth as a solution for access to education, we will always need more leaders in this space. I think there is an opportunity within the Council to expand representation and engagement by all members, and I aim to promote that and foster broader leadership through updated DLSS Members Council by-laws."

FloridaShines Offers Links to College Virtual Tours

It is a great time for high school students to start planning their campus visits to Florida's public colleges and universities. However, some students and their families may not be able or comfortable yet making a visit in person.

Many institutions offer virtual tours, giving students the option to visit college campuses without ever having to leave their home. FloridaShines launched a webpage last year featuring links to virtual tours from many of Florida's colleges and universities. Since the launch, several institutions have been added to the webpage and others have updated their links and pages. Virtual tours are great option for students that want to start their college search early.

Students can visit www.floridashines.org/go-tocollege/get-ready-for-college/virtual-campus-tours and tour virtually from any device to feel like they have just stepped foot on campus.

Two Florida Institutions Named Finalists for Aspen Prize

Broward College and Tallahassee Community College were among the ten finalists for this year's prestigious Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

The Aspen Prize, awarded every two years since 2011, recognizes outstanding institutions selected from a pool of more than 1,000 community colleges nationwide. The award honors institutions with outstanding achievement in six areas: teaching and learning, certificate and degree completion, transfer and bachelor's attainment, workforce success, equitable outcomes for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, and leadership and culture.

Broward College won $100,000 and the honor of Finalist with Distinction. Both Florida institutions were recognized May 18 during a virtual ceremony. Among the speakers at the ceremony were First Lady Dr. Jill Biden and U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. The Aspen Prize was awarded to San Antonio College.

Zero Textbook Cost Course Indicator Launching Soon in FloridaShines

The Florida Virtual Campus (FLVC) is excited to launch Florida's Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) Indicator for the FloridaShines Course Catalog.

A new webpage that provides an overview and more information is now available at Florida's Zero Textbook Cost Course Indicator Website to all institutions that want to participate and showcase their ZTC courses in the Catalog. Building on previous FLVC textbook affordability efforts, a 2021 workgroup was convened with representatives from Florida's colleges and universities to brainstorm, define and provide best recommendations to implement textbook cost indicator(s) in the FloridaShines Course Catalog. The ZTC course indicator will be used as a course designation to inform students that there are no textbook costs required with the course and is the result of the hard work of the Florida Zero Textbook Cost Course Indicator Workgroup.

Development of the functionality to upload the ZTC Indicator icon is underway and the FLVC is hopeful that system development will be completed soon, making this discoverable to students for the Spring 2022 schedule. Please contact catalog@flvc.org if you have any further questions on the ZTC indicator or the FloridaShines upload process.

Reminders

Catalog Upload Deadline

The deadline to upload both institution profiles and degree programs to the FloridaShines Catalog is July 1. The institutions profiles are updated annually by the Profile Editor. The degree programs are uploaded annually by the Data Administrator. Reminder e-mails and notifications are distributed during the upload period to institution administrators. If you need assistance with your upload, please contact the catalog support team at catalog@flvc.org.

Members Council Meeting

The DLSS Members Council met virtually on Monday, June 28. A post legislative update was provided by Dr. Carrie Henderson, Executive Vice Chancellor of the FCS. An update on emerging policy issues was also given by Dr John Opper, Executive Director of DLSS. Tim Brown, Assistant Vice President of Florida State University ITS: NWRDC and FLVC provided an update on the governance of NWRDC-FLVC. A recording of the meeting can be accessed here.

Let Us Help You Promote Your Events

FLVC and FloridaShines would like to help you promote your institution's special events or programs on our social media platforms. Please send event notices from your college and university to Richard Conn at rconn@flvc.org.