

Introduction

The proposed Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), "Navigate Online Excellence: A Quest for Student Success," represents a strategic initiative by Navarro College to address and enhance the effectiveness of its online educational offerings. As online learning continues to grow in popularity and necessity, institutions are increasingly challenged to optimize their online programs to meet the diverse needs of students and improve overall outcomes. This QEP aims to address these challenges by integrating best practices from the latest research in online education to foster an environment that supports student success and institutional excellence.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, online classes in higher education became a common part of the landscape. In 2017, 33.7% of all higher education students in the United States took online classes (Snyder et al., 2019). Roughly one-third of the higher education classes came in various forms. Many online classes may be synchronous with specific times for the online class to meet. Other classes might be asynchronous, where the student does the classwork at their own pace (Chingos et al., 2017), some of which were large undergraduate offerings, while others might be small graduate courses. However, once the COVID-19 pandemic began, the adoption of online courses skyrocketed. Approximately 97% of the students in the United States took online courses in 2020 (Morrison, 2021).

Among the most important purposes of community colleges is to increase access to higher education. Community Colleges offer a path to higher educational credentials that might otherwise be unattainable for millions of students (Li, 2021). Community colleges have welcomed online education to promote access. Community colleges enroll a larger percentage of their students in online classes than public universities in the United States (Sublett, 2022). After the return to face-to-face classes in the United States, post the COVID 19 switch to online classes, the fall semester of 2022 saw 54% of community college students in the United States take an online course (NCES).

Online education has become a crucial component of the modern educational landscape, offering flexibility and accessibility to a wide range of learners. For Navarro College, the expansion of online learning presents both opportunities and challenges. While online courses provide students with the convenience of studying from anywhere, they also come with unique

challenges, including maintaining engagement, ensuring effective communication, and providing adequate support. Addressing these challenges is essential for maximizing the potential benefits of online education and ensuring that all Navarro College students can achieve their academic goals.

The practice of offering online classes is not without difficulties for students. Xu and Jagers (2014) showed that, in Washington State community colleges, online students had lower grades in online cases than in face-to-face classes. A similar study comparing the performance of students in online classes versus face-to-face classes was conducted in California community colleges (Hart et al., 2018). Hart et al.'s. showed that students performed worse in online courses than in the same courses in face-to-face format (2018).

The continued presence of online courses in higher education is undisputed (Hachey, 2022). However, there are areas of online education that can be improved (Chaharbashloo, 2023; Hachey, 2022). If addressed, these areas can improve student performance and retention. The important aspects of online education addressed in this literature review include faculty development, student readiness for online courses, engaging elements of course design and at-risk students.

The QEP is designed to tackle several pressing issues identified through institutional data and student feedback. Research has shown that students engaged in online learning often face higher rates of attrition compared to their peers in traditional classroom settings. Factors contributing to this include difficulty navigating online platforms, insufficient technical support, and a lack of engagement with course content. The QEP aims to address these issues by implementing strategies that have been proven effective in other educational settings. By focusing on faculty development, engaging course design, targeted student support, and interventions for at-risk students, Navarro College seeks to create a more robust and supportive online learning environment.

To achieve its aims, the QEP will focus on several key objectives:

1. **Faculty Development:** Equip faculty with the skills and knowledge necessary to deliver high-quality online instruction. This includes training in best practices for online teaching and the use of educational technologies.
2. **Engaging Course Design:** Develop and implement course designs that foster student engagement and participation. This involves creating interactive and collaborative learning experiences that resonate with online students.
3. **Student Support:** Enhance the support systems available to online learners, including technical assistance, academic advising, and mental health resources. Tailoring these supports to the specific needs of online students will help improve their overall experience and success.
4. **At-Risk Students:** Identify and support students who are at risk of falling behind or dropping out. By implementing targeted interventions and monitoring progress, Navarro College aims to improve retention and completion rates.

This literature review evaluates research across four key areas that are critical to the success of the QEP: faculty development, engaging course design, student support, and at-risk students. Each area provides valuable insights into best practices and strategies shown to enhance online education. By reviewing and synthesizing current research, Navarro College can adopt evidence-based approaches that are likely to be effective in addressing the challenges faced by its online learners.

Faculty Development

Faculty development is crucial for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of online education. The evolving landscape of online learning requires educators to continuously adapt and improve their teaching practices to meet the needs of diverse learners. Several key studies highlight the importance of faculty development in creating a successful online learning environment.

At first glance, the most obvious difference between face-to-face classes and online classes is the digital environment. If instructors venture into the online environment without training, effective instruction is a significant hurdle (Glazier, 2021). College instructors require

sufficient technological training to resolve potential problems in an online environment. Insufficient technological skills can compromise student access to learning materials (Roddy et al., 2017). Instructors must feel a sense of ownership when it comes to online classes. Samuel (2016) mentioned the need for mentors and a community of practice to learn in. Samuel emphasized that faculty found the most support when mentors existed in their own institution.

Teaching in an online environment requires technological competencies that are different from face-to-face instruction (Thomas & Graham, 2019). Instructors need broad knowledge of learning in an online environment. It is common for online instructors to be proficient in Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and multimedia devices (Chaharbashloo, 2023). It is not unusual for the instructor of an online course to be the course designer (Baldwin, 2018; F. Martin, 2019). Instructors must be comfortable using learning management systems (Chaharbashloo, 2023). It is helpful for online instructors to be knowledgeable about the latest apps and software related to online learning (Chaharbashloo, 2023).

The importance of communication between instructors and students in online classes is strongly represented in the literature (Crews, 2015). Online students want the content of the course, which is clearly communicated to them (Crews, 2015; glazier). Students desire that faculty take time to describe course expectations, syllabi, assignments, and tests (Glazier, 2021).

Another aspect of communication between instructors and students is availability. In Glaziers (2021) study, the greatest factor for whether students liked a class was based on instructor responsiveness. The faculty must be prepared to offer as much immediacy as possible in terms of communication for students (Preisman, 2014). Crews studied whether good instructor communication practices in face-to-face classrooms also hold true in an online environment (2015). Crews survey of 179 undergraduate students found that quick feedback, specificity of assignment due dates, and clear communication were highly valued.

Effective communication between instructors and students is partially built on rapport. Rapport in online classes is associated with higher retention rates (Fike & Fike, 2008; Glazier, 2020; Lo et al., 2016), and Glazier (2020) described teaching with rapport as demonstrating a sense of caring and responsiveness to students. Glazier and Harris (2020) studied 319 undergraduates, where the students received concentrated efforts of rapport-building from

instructors. Students indicated a 25% lower likelihood of dropping a course if instructors attempted rapport (Glazier & Harris, 2020).

Student Readiness

Kauffman (2015) says that a good deal of responsibility is placed on the learner in an online college course. Students in an online environment must review class material independently and take exams when they are scheduled. This requires more discipline on the part of the student than in face-to-face classes. Some students were ready for this type of responsibility, while others were not. Poor preparedness in an online class impacts student grades and completion rates (Yeh, 2019...) The literature on student readiness to take online courses reveals the characteristics that are needed and how institutions can help (Hachey, 2022; Hudson et al., 2022; Joosten, 2020).

Literature shows that skills such as time management, study skills, and computer literacy are important in readiness to take a college online course (Dhawan, 2020). Hachey (2022) found that students need a sense of motivation, self-discipline, and independence. Joosten (2020) studied the factors that play a role in the success of undergraduate students in online courses. Joosten (2020) found that student self-efficacy, or their belief in their ability to do well in an online course, was influential in determining whether a student would ultimately perform well.

Assessing student readiness is crucial for understanding online learners and how to meet and support their academic needs (Hudson, 2022). Xu and Xu (2019) mention research in California Community colleges that emphasize the need for online learning assessments. In addition, Xu and Xu advise that colleges implement early warning systems for faculty when students are struggling with the online environment. Henson (2020) recommended that readiness for online learning can be ascertained through an actual online college course. The course can appraise students' current abilities and provide them with technical skills. Joosten (2020) also mentioned that the use of orientation courses can increase the likelihood of success in an online course.

Course Engagement

The literature shows various strategies that can support student engagement in online classrooms. When the instructor provides a welcome video, it helps to detail expectations and

create a sense of community for the class (Khan et al, 2017) Also, students should post introductory videos of themselves. This is another way students can foster a sense of community in class (Aldrich, 2017). In the online class, the students wanted an opportunity to connect with the instructor. Instructors can create informal check-ins for the students. Opportunities in the class should exist that offer the student an opportunity to comment on assignments, with instructor feedback afterwards (Kaufman, 2021)

Kauffman (2021) stressed the need for group work and peer collaboration. Kauffman cautioned that group work should be carefully explained to students. Online group work should include written expectations of all students in the group. Students in an online environment want many interactive elements in their course. Students simply do not want to read the text and take tests based on it. The literature shows a need for the integration of multimedia and the opportunity to stop at times and reflect on the subject (Kaufman, 2015).

Li (2021) studied effective practices in online education as practiced by 105 faculty members in North Carolina Community Colleges. Li found that the faculty members perceived effective practices as offering discussion forum activities, giving quality feedback on assignments, providing proactive outreach with timely support, offering varied materials and diversified media in content delivery, and making regular announcements and reminders.

Addressing the needs of at-risk students is a fundamental aspect of enhancing overall student success and ensuring equitable educational outcomes. At-risk students often face unique challenges that can impede their academic progress and success. Effective support strategies tailored to these challenges can significantly improve their retention, engagement, and performance.

Kiikeri, Uusiautti, and Purtilo-Nieminen (2024) offer valuable insights into supporting at-risk students in online vocational education. Their study focuses on students' thriving and well-being, emphasizing the importance of addressing specific challenges faced by those at risk of academic failure or disengagement. The research reveals several key factors that impact the success of at-risk students, including:

1. **Individualized Support:** At-risk students often require personalized attention to address their specific needs. Tailored support mechanisms, such as one-on-one academic advising and personalized learning plans, can help these students navigate their educational pathways more effectively. By providing individualized support, Navarro College can help at-risk students overcome barriers and stay on track to achieve their academic goals.
2. **Holistic Well-Being:** The well-being of at-risk students extends beyond academic performance. Factors such as mental health, financial stability, and family responsibilities can significantly affect their ability to succeed. Implementing strategies that address these holistic needs, such as counseling services, financial aid support, and flexible learning options, can improve overall student well-being and success.
3. **Engagement and Motivation:** At-risk students may struggle with motivation and engagement, which can affect their academic performance. Strategies that enhance engagement, such as interactive course design, regular feedback, and opportunities for peer interaction, can help maintain students' interest and commitment to their studies.
4. **Academic and Technical Support:** Ensuring that at-risk students have access to academic and technical support is crucial. Providing resources such as tutoring, technical assistance, and study skills workshops can help students overcome challenges and succeed in their online courses.

Implementing Support Strategies

1. Individualized Academic Advising: Develop comprehensive academic advising services that offer personalized guidance to at-risk students. Advisors should be trained to recognize the signs of academic struggle and provide targeted interventions to support students in overcoming challenges.

2. Holistic Support Services: Create a network of support services that address the broader needs of at-risk students. This may include mental health counseling, financial aid assistance, and support for balancing academic and personal responsibilities. Ensuring that students have access to these resources can help them manage stress and stay focused on their studies.

3. Enhancing Engagement: Design courses and learning experiences that foster engagement and motivation. Incorporate interactive elements, such as discussion forums, group projects, and multimedia resources, to create a more engaging learning environment. Regularly assess student progress and provide constructive feedback to keep students motivated and on track.

4. Academic and Technical Resources: Provide at-risk students with access to academic and technical resources that can support their learning. This includes offering tutoring services, technical support for navigating online platforms, and workshops on study skills and time management.

Supporting at-risk students is crucial for improving their academic outcomes and overall success. By implementing tailored support strategies that address individual needs, promote well-being, enhance engagement, and provide necessary resources, Navarro College can better support its at-risk students. These efforts will contribute to higher retention rates, increased academic achievement, and a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Navarro College is implementing a comprehensive plan to enhance online student success and improve institutional outcomes through the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) titled "Navigate Online Excellence: A Quest for Student Success." The following initiatives and strategies have been developed and are being explored to support this objective:

1. **Online Student Orientation:** A Canvas Online Orientation has been developed to provide students with essential information and resources to navigate the online learning environment effectively within Canvas the Navarro College learning management systems.
2. **Virtual Office Hours:** While the proposal for full-time faculty members to have a minimum of one virtual office hour for their online students was not approved, the need for faculty accessibility remains recognized as critical for student support.
3. **Common Canvas Template:** A pilot program will be implemented in the Fall/2024 semester within the History, Chemistry, Art, and Biology departments to implement a

standardized Canvas template (Landing Page) across all their courses. This initiative aims to create a consistent and user-friendly online course experience for students.

4. **Synchronous Online Evening Development Education Classes:** To improve engagement and support for online and Adult Education learners, Navarro College is exploring the offering of synchronous online evening development education classes. This initiative aims to help students navigate Navarro College Canvas, learning management system more effectively.
5. **Online Student Housing:** There is an ongoing discussion about revisiting the number of online students allowed in housing, particularly for Baseball students in the Business department.

Alignment with QEP Objectives

The above initiatives align with the QEP objectives to enhance retention, persistence, and graduation rates at Navarro College by focusing on:

1. **Increasing Online Retention Rates:** Early assessment and targeted support are key strategies for retaining online students. The Canvas Online Orientation and potential synchronous online evening classes aim to provide the necessary support from the beginning of the students' higher education journey.
2. **Improving Online Success:** The development of a common Canvas template aims to standardize course setups and provide consistent, user-friendly experiences, which are crucial for online student success.
3. **Enhancing Institutional Outcomes:** Establishing communication channels, providing regular feedback, and utilizing data analytics are integral to improving overall institutional outcomes. The exploration of consistent course design supports these efforts by fostering better communication and feedback mechanisms.
4. **Fostering a Supportive Online Learning Environment:** Interactive course design, peer mentoring, and faculty support are essential for creating a supportive online learning environment. The pilot programs and ongoing discussions about student housing and synchronous classes reflect a commitment to enhancing the online learning experience.

In conclusion, Navarro College is implementing a comprehensive plan to enhance online student success and improve institutional outcomes through the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) titled "Navigate Online Excellence: A Quest for Student Success." This plan represents a strategic initiative aimed at addressing the unique challenges faced by students in online education and ensuring their engagement, support, and success.

The QEP acknowledges the growing importance of online education, particularly highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, where 97% of students in the United States participated in online courses in 2020 (Morrison, 2021). Despite the convenience and flexibility offered by online learning, it comes with unique challenges, such as maintaining student engagement, ensuring effective communication, and providing adequate support. Research indicates that online students often face higher rates of attrition compared to their peers in traditional classroom settings due to difficulties in navigating online platforms and a lack of engagement with course content (Xu & Jagers, 2014; Hart et al., 2018).

To address these challenges, Navarro College has developed and is exploring the following initiatives and strategies:

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By integrating these evidence-based strategies, Navarro College aims to create a more robust and supportive online learning environment. This QEP not only seeks to improve student outcomes in online courses but also to set a standard for excellence in online education. The commitment to continuous improvement and dedication to student success will ensure that Navarro College remains at the forefront of providing high-quality online education that meets the diverse needs of its student population. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the

opportunities presented by online learning, Navarro College can enhance its educational offerings and support the success of all its students.

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