

## SAIL Executive Summary

In support of the Gaston College mission to promote student success and lifelong learning through high caliber, affordable, and comprehensive educational programs and services, Gaston College has developed a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) called Strengthening Academic Internet Learning (SAIL). ***The goal of SAIL is to provide a high quality learning experience for students in online courses.*** This will be accomplished by creating and implementing standards for online course design and delivery based on best practices in distance education. Gaston College will measure the success of SAIL by comparing the achievement of course level Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) in selected online courses to their traditional seated counterparts using a uniformly-delivered course assessment of SLOs as a gauge.

During the last ten years, Gaston College has seen unprecedented growth in student demand for more flexible course offerings. Online courses help community colleges serve students whose job and family situations compete with their ability to attend traditional classes. Gaston College first offered courses via the Internet during academic year 1999-2000. Eight Internet courses were offered. Last year (2010-2011), the College delivered 443 online course sections, serving 4,760 students, representing 53% of the total curriculum student population. Over the years, the College has guided online instruction by maintaining an Online Instruction Committee (OIC) charged with identifying and implementing established best practices in online course delivery. In 2007, this committee established a voluntary pilot project, Gaston College Online Quality Initiative, certifying online courses which utilized these best practices.

Over 100 courses were evaluated for quality during the pilot project. Expansion of this pilot project seemed to be a natural fit for a strong QEP. Faculty indicated that a more positive learning experience for online students resulted from strengthening online course quality. Faculty suggested that improvements still needed to be made to the quality standards and more reliable data collected to accurately evaluate the project's success. A QEP Implementation Team was created by the College president to further evaluate the project, glean stakeholder input, and refine the direction of SAIL.

Many important issues related to online learning surfaced during the project evaluation, but the consensus among faculty, staff, students, and the community was that a focus on improved course quality would provide the greatest impact on student learning. A review of best practices in distance education and a thorough literature review supported this decision.

The College uses assessment of SLOs to measure student learning. Further investigation of the pilot project revealed that SLOs were not being consistently measured between online and seated traditional courses, rendering the previous comparative data unreliable. The standardization of course level SLOs assessment became an important part of the project.

Over the life of SAIL, designated online courses will be required to create an ideal online environment for student learning and measure the achievement of course level SLOs. Data indicating student performance on course level SLOs will be compared between each online course and its seated traditional counterpart to determine if students are experiencing the same level of learning in both modalities. SAIL is a five-year project involving three waves of five courses each for a total of 15 courses. Each year assessment results will be used to make improvements. A review of SAIL and its impact will be conducted during year five.

The benefit of Gaston College's QEP, SAIL, is threefold. It supports the College's mission to promote student learning, responds to the increased demand in distance education, and expands the College's commitment to online course excellence and to distance education as a viable method of course delivery.