Policy 000.00 – Academic Advisory Board

	This	Replaces
File:	000.00	New
Date:	00/00/00	New

POLICY OWNER: Provost and Senior Vice President
of Academic Affairs

I.   Introduction and Purpose

In accordance with University System of Maryland Policy I - 6.00 Policy on Shared Governance in the University System of Maryland, approved on August 25, 2000 by the Board of Regents, UMUC has developed an Academic Advisory Board to allow input from and provide information to faculty about significant academic decisions.

The Academic Advisory Board (AAB) at UMUC serves as an advisory body committed to providing advice that is representative of the views of faculty constituencies across the university for the purpose of improving the academic experience at UMUC. The AAB strives to enhance stewardship of the curriculum such that the student learning experience is continuously improved, enhanced, and optimized. The AAB also serves as a liaison between the university leadership and the university-wide faculty constituency for the purpose of keeping faculty informed about academic issues.

II.   Areas of Participation

The UMUC administration may solicit advice from the AAB in the following areas:

a. Curriculum design and delivery, including learning and learning evaluation, implementation of technologies, pedagogies, and tools;
b. The implementation of policies and processes that impact faculty, teaching, and the learning experience;
c. Policies and processes related to the student learning experience;
d. Other specific academic issues and/or insights given their special knowledge and expertise;
e. Changes in the academic/higher education landscape, affecting the learning environment, the competitive framework, or learning science.

dormitories or football team. Moreover, it has been engaged in a process of rapid transformation over the past two decades that has served to further distinguish it from other public institutions in the state.

Some of the differences are familiar to you. UMUC has always focused on adult learners who are usually older than traditional college age students, have competing priorities including work and family, and require different support systems than students on a residential campus.

Another attribute of the university is its widely disbursed student body. Starting with educational offerings for the military in Europe in the 1940s and Asia in the 1950s, UMUC has always been more than just a Maryland institution. With the rapid growth in popularity of online courses, UMUC now is among the largest universities in the world and competes in a field where change is constant.

In FY2014, UMUC enrolled approximately 85,000 students worldwide. Of these, 87 percent took at least one course online, and UMUC had more than 243,000 online course enrollments and offered 981 distinct courses online. In fact, the vast majority of students worldwide complete their degrees predominantly online.

Currently, UMUC offers more than 90 undergraduate and graduate programs and specializations. Most can be completed fully online. Due to increasing student demand for learning online, no program is now offered entirely on-site.

These characteristics of the present day institution have led to distinctive approaches in:

- ¥ its programmatic offerings,
- ¥ the role of faculty at UMUC,
- ¥ the focus on technology-enhanced learning, and
- ¥ reliance on data-driven decision making.

These attributes form the foundation on which UMUC expects to continue evolving its academic model in response to an international education market that will change in waysÑ

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Academic Programs at UMUC

From a starting point of adult students taking most of their courses online, the nature of academic programsÑtheir development, focus, learning assumptions, and relationship to the world of workÑis different at UMUC than at most traditional universities.

The degree program, rather than the individual course, is the basic building block of academics. Th relatively simple statement is in fact a radical idea within contemporary higher education. The primary focus in creating any particular academic degreeÑand it may be easier to think first of graduate programsÑis to identify the learning objectives and skills that are the intended outcomes for a student taking the program.

Using that premise, every courseÑas well as the sequence of coursesÑis tied to the learning objectives. Learning by doing, and doing repeatedly, will be built into each program through the inclusion of certain skills in multiple courses. The goal is to ensure that every graduate of the program has mastered a set of competencies that are viewed as critical to the particular field.

Utilizing data that is generated by online courses, it is possible to determine whether a student has mastered a skill in class 3 that is essential for moving to a more advanced level in class 5. Ultimately, the logic of this approach may lead to evaluations of student progress that are based on their ability to master particular competencies rather than by the amount of time they spend in class.

To make this system work, it is important that each section of a course provide the same material as every other section. As a result, UMUC is moving to a standardization of curriculum, educational materials, and syllabi. There is a centralized course development process, which allows instructors to then focus on student learning. This point is described more fully in the section on faculty.

A recent innovation that is now being fully implemented is the use of open educational resources rather than standard textbooks. Besides saving students the considerable expenses incurred, this approach allows the most current materials to be available for each class. Each class is no longer defined by the textbook, but instead uses educational resources to support the learning objectives.

The curricular challenge for UMUC is a bit different for undergraduate programs than it is for graduate degrees. In the first place, almost all of UMUCÕs students come with some prior learning, including but not limited to college courses. As the university more fully adopts a competency model, prior work and life experience, systematically and rigorously evaluated, will be part of a studentÕs pathway to an undergraduate degree.

As with graduate programs, the objective of identifying and incorporating clear learning objectives and relevant skills is also a part of the undergraduate education model. Regardless of a studentÕs prior college experience, the specific courses that constitute the major and

sequence of those courses is carefully structured to ensure that the student achieves the competencies needed in the field.

One important step that the university has recently taken has been to dramatically streamline undergraduate degree pathways. There is a growing concern in higher education that the almost unlimited and unrelated panoply of courses available in most universities results in undergraduate degrees with little coherence or core knowledge. Too many courses are stand-alone outliers, taught primarily because they reflect the interest of one faculty member.

Within the number of credits that a student transferring to UMUC needs to fulfill the requirements for an undergraduate degree, there is a focus on competency, learning by doing, and specific skills. To reiterate a key point, most UMUC students already have work experience and are looking to augment their knowledge and skills for future employment and careers.

An important disclaimer is in order at this point. For some readers, the prior discussion may sound like a description of career or vocational education. ThatÕs a false dichotomy. The same fundamental skillsÑanalyzing, writing, organizing, communication, critical thinkingÑ are at the heart of a liberal arts education as are required to be successful in the workplace.

Indeed, employers frequently comment that college graduates, regardless of their major, often lack these fundamental skills. We are committed at UMUC to ensuring that all students entering the world of work have the ability to succeed in both their careers and their day-to-day lives. Being function as well-informed and thoughtful citizens is no less important than the other areas of their li

Two final points will get additional attention in subsequent sections. First, the development of new programs and the modification of existing ones are heavily influenced by ongoing interaction w employers and businesses. Understanding the competencies and skills that are necessary for success in any particular field, as well as being able to identify emerging fields, is critical if UMUC is to be a leader in the educational market. To cite a contemporary example, spring 2016 courses in cyber-security will use the hacking of the Office of Personnel ManagementÕs web site as a case study.

Higher education is in many ways a highly regulated market. There are numerous rules and procedures that must be followed before a new program can be offered. That model is out of date, even anachronistic. We live in a global economy where borders are not nearly as

Second, classes can be organized around the learning objectives rather than around the structure of a textbook. UMUCÕs course development process, with teams working to plan a course and identify the appropriate materials, allows a comprehensive approach to the learning objectives.

Moreover, with all instructors using the same materials for any particular course, students are ensured a common educational experience. This contrasts with the situation in many institutions where each faculty member individually writes the course outline and selects the textbooks to be used in that section.

As important as these steps are, the digital library and the online course materials are, in the end, merely the supporting structure for any course.

Online education over the years has seen the development and revision of a number of learning management systems (LMS) that form the architecture for online class

UMUC for a number of years had its own proprietary LMS known as WebTycho. These systems allow an instructor to embed assignments, discussion forums, supporting materials, and evaluation procedures into a class in an online format accessible to students. In 2013Ð14, the university moved to a new LMS with similar functionality.

The sophistication and functionality of LMS platforms has continued to evolve and is now at a new stage. In its earlier iterations, most of these learning platforms replicated a traditional classroom in an online format. That is no longer the case.

With more tools availableÑmultimedia, adaptive learning mechanisms, feedback devices, and data collection systemsÑthe next generation of online courses is likely to move beyond anything that is currently available in an LMS.

UMUC is working with other institutions and exploring the latest trends in online learning systems. UMUCÕs goal is an intuitive, seamless user interface, in which numerous functions are interconnected in a way that is totally invisible to the viewer. The next version of the digital user experience will be personalized to each student, rather than a standardized one-size-fits-all model.

For the student, what will be important is that online classes will have more tools, more resources, and more interactive features. For the instructor, there will be more options in terms of working individually with students, monitoring and evaluating their progress, providing personalized feedback, and having a rich array of data to assess in terms of both the student and the course.

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Data-Driven Decision Making

Online classes, if properly designed, generate enormous amounts of data about student learning. That phenomenon has resulted in the growing field of data analytics in which UMUC is both a leader and a pioneer.

While all aspects of data analytics have potential importance, the single most important area is the provide tools to assess and intervene in a studentÕs educational experience. UMUC has already id key indicators that are present in the first few days of a studentÕs initial class as predictors of success in a program.

With the overriding philosophy of wanting to do everything possible to help students succeed, this early ÒmarkerÓ may suggest skills that a student needs to acquire before continuing in the program. Additional assistance by the faculty member on a personalized basis may be required.

With the design of academic programs involving each phase building on the mastery of preceding materials, early identification can prevent a student from getting to the fourth or fifth class in a program without the skills to be successful.

In the same manner, a faculty member is able to track the progress of any student not merely in terms of the completion of a series of assignments, but in terms of the mastery of the necessary skills. This tool has the potentialÑas it is more fully developed and as faculty become more proficient in its useÑto significantly increase the completion and success rate for students.

A similar insight can be obtained with respect to the effectiveness of instruction. Given the standard approach to multiple sections of any class, it is also possible to evaluate whether students in different sections are succeeding at the same rate. This perspective can help determine whether there is something in the approach that a particular faculty member brings to the class that increases the learning of students relative to those in other classes.

This category of data can be an important tool for a program chair in evaluating faculty and in providing feedback on how to be more effective.

There is, in addition, another layer to the impact of data analytics on assessment. With programs and classes aligned to employer expectations about the acquisition of competencies most important to a specific field, a macro-analysis of, for example, a program in accounting can determine whether the graduates of that program are obtaining the desired outcomes.

While this white paper is focused on UMUCÕs academic programs, the use of sophisticated

Are there legal or regulatory barriers to overcome? Are there culture issues that need to be taken into account? Are there academic fields that UMUC does not offer currently that could be attractive in some of those markets?

These are among the issues that UMUC faces as it endeavors to be a leading provider of online education on a national and international scale.

But there are other ventures that may be on the horizon as well. An area in which UMUC has already had some success is in establishing partnerships with businesses and with government. The opportunities for customized programsÑwhether closed site or open to multiple clientsÑwill continue to be explored.

Partnerships with other educational institutions could also be in the offing. These relationships could take many forms. For example, UMUC might well be the platform and facilitator for other USM institutions to offer their degree programs online. Many are in relatively early stages of development and could save both development costs and learning curves by partnering with UMUC.

Growth in some fields occurs as the result of one business acquiring another. UMUCÕs new business model opens that avenue as a possibility in the future.

As a leader in educational technology, UMUC has the potential to create related business venturesAn example that the Board of Regents is already familiar with is the data analytics effort, NewCo, conceptualized at UMUC and to be spun off as in independent for-profit entity. There could be other technology initiatives that follow in the future.

When the Board of Regents approved UMUCÕs new business model last spring, it gave UMUC the tools and flexibility to greatly expand its educational horizon. This white paper has described not only what the university has achieved up to now, but has also outlined the near term future. What is more excitingÑand what a white paper cannot doÑis to imagine those initiatives that are just beyond the horizon.

A System of Academic Governance for the New University

Throughout its history, academic governance at UMUC evolved and changed to adapt to new circumstances. Building the university of the future requires a re-formulation of academic governance. Three overriding principles have guided the reformulation of governance at UMUC. In the first place, we are building upon an earlier white paper approved by the Board of Regents last spring that presented the universityÕs new business model: We are creating an academic institution that responds nimbly to the needs of the workplace, seeks to measure competencies mastered rather than hours spent in a classroom, and utilizes technology for both learning and assessment.

That university envisions a role for all faculty that are engaged, proactive and adaptive to the