



Northern Essex
Community College

Student Success in Online Learning

A Process Management Report
4/5/07

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student Success in Online Learning

Project Goal Statement: *To foster student success in online learning, as measured by successful course completion, through examining factors such as:*

- *Advising*
- *Student preparedness*
- *Student support services*
- *Faculty preparedness*

Overarching Purpose: Enrollments have soared in online courses over the past few years. The opportunity to pursue an education without the time and place requirements of traditional classroom attendance has provided a major boost to student access and to college enrollments. Many students, who, for reasons of location, schedule, work, family and other demands have been prohibited from participating in traditional educational programs, are now able to integrate college coursework into their daily lives.

Course completion rates for online students have typically lagged behind the completion rates for traditional courses. This is true both nationally and here at NECC. There are a wide range of factors that influence the success of students in online courses. Online courses are not for everyone. Students in online courses face new demands for self motivation, time management, communication, reading, and computer skills.

Research: A review of the institutional research data, and the survey and interview data collected by Jackie Long-Goding, led the team to design survey instruments for further defining which of the success factors weighted *most heavily* in determining student completion rates in online courses, and which factors offered the most promising opportunities for intervention and improvement.

In our study of Fall 2006 students:

- 37.5% of the students surveyed were taking their first online course
- 53% of first time online students completed the course, vs. 79% for students with prior online success.
- 56.3% of the online students have never discussed the option of online courses with an advisor
- 63.9% had not read or utilized any of the available information about online courses before registering for one.
- Of the students who had failed to complete an online course, most blamed poor time management, poor self selection of online courses, and the difficulty of the course.

The very high correlation of results between our student and faculty surveys, those done by Jackie Long-Goding, and the institutional research data, provides a very high data confidence factor. Issues related to advising and student self selection were driven to the forefront. Surprisingly, expected problems from technological issues, student computer skills, and use of WebCT were statistically insignificant by comparison. Thus, the advising process became the primary focus of our improvement theories.

Improvement Theory:

The following improvement elements are recommended:

- Intrusive (required) advising for first time online students
- Intrusive (required) advising for all students on academic probation or suspension.
- Modify Banner System to require students registering for their first online course to have an advisors approval
- Conduct regular training sessions for front staff, faculty and professional staff
- Improve the Virtual Advising Center with web based advising tools, including real time chat options for students.
- Have a designated Web-Advisor to provide Academic and Resource Advising to all of our students who take online courses and our Distance Ed population

Cost Projections:

The team recommends that the institution support the request of the Academic Advising Center to hire an e-advisor to support the additional demands of the virtual advising center operations, and to expand the software licensing for the real-time chat based advising system.

Staff:	\$49,000.
Software:	500.

Total	49,500.

Plan of Operation:

The plan to improve completion and retention rates of students in online courses will be the responsibility of the College Community as a whole, but the brunt of the burden will fall directly on those staff and faculty who have direct contact with students. Whether a student is in the Advising and Registration phase or are the very beginning of their attendance in online courses, the appropriate Action Steps should be exercised.

Decentralized Model of Responsibilities:

Frontline staff, Professional Advisors, and Faculty will have a responsibility to provide all students and in particular first time online students with either the proper referral or academic advising in regard to the demands of online courses. Decentralized systems are absolutely essential in order to improve retention in Online Courses for both first time students and seasoned students.

Timelines:

Many of the improvement items are already in development. It is expected that the Virtual Advising tools will be available during the Spring 2007 semester. The Banner modifications and staff training are targeted for Summer and early Fall 2007, with a goal of full implementation for the registration period scheduled to begin on November 1st, 2007.

Supplemental improvements to the distance learning website, including the student readiness survey, will be released concurrent with the Summer 2007 semester.

INTRODUCTION

Student Success in Online Learning

Enrollments in online courses have soared over the past several years. The opportunity to pursue an education without the time and place requirements of traditional classroom attendance has provided a major boost to student access and to college enrollments. Many students, who, for reasons of location, schedule, work, family and other demands have been prohibited from participating in traditional educational programs, are now able to integrate college coursework into their complex daily lives.

Course completion rates for online students have typically lagged behind the completion rates for traditional courses. This is true both nationally, here at NECC, and at other area community colleges. There are a wide range of factors that influence the success of students in online courses. Online courses are not for everyone. Students entering online courses face new demands for self motivation, time management, communication, reading, and computer skills.

Jackie Long-Gooding, as part of her doctoral research, conducted a systematic and comprehensive survey and interview process to examine student success factors in online learning environments. Her results highlighted certain factors that influence student completion rates, and the role of advising in the process of enrolling students in online courses.

Excerpted from “Student Success in an Online Learning Environment”
(Long-Goding, 2006)

Retention in online courses is generally accepted as lower than in face-to-face courses; however there is considerable variation in retention across institutions. Some institutions report retention in online courses consistent with retention in their face-to-face offerings, while others report drop out rates as high as 50% (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004; Morris, Wu, & Finnegan, 2005; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005).

Advisors were asked to describe the three factors that lead to success in an online course. Content analysis revealed three dominant themes: (1) time management, (2) computer skills, and (3) self-sufficiency. Two of these themes, time management and self-sufficiency are consistent with the dominant themes identified by faculty who teach online courses.

With a foundation of Institutional Research Office data, the research reported by Long-Gooding, and the anecdotal experiences of the online faculty team members, the team was consistent in the belief that our challenge would be to determine, from both the student and faculty perspective, which of the success factors weighted *most heavily* in determining student completion rates in online courses. The need for comprehensive student survey data was clear. Our challenge would be to determine which success factors were most influential here at NECC, and which factors offered the most promising opportunities for intervention and improvement.

Project Statement: To foster student success in online learning, as measured by successful course completion, through examining factors such as:

- **Advising**
- **Student preparedness**
- **Student support services**
- **Faculty preparedness**

Assumptions: Project's Core Principles

The team agreed to the following general principles as guidelines for proceeding with research, analysis, and generating recommendations.

***Assumption:* Maximizing student's academic success will be the primary factor driving recommendations.**

***Assumption:* Comprehensive survey data will be collected to assure that significant student and faculty input is acquired.**

***Assumption:* The Project will be built on a strong foundation of quantitative and qualitative data.**

***Assumption:* The Project will attempt to build on existing services whenever possible, incorporating support for online learners within current departments and service areas.**

***Assumption:* The Project will build on existing institutional efforts for student retention.**

Operational Definitions:

Distance Education:

Instruction, education, and or training conducted at sites separated by space or time which may utilize technology to facilitate learning. This definition is applicable to all programming, whether low or high technology, that reflects this definition. Courses are offered in the following formats:

- **Online:** Completely online with no classroom meetings
- **Hybrid:** Online course with some limited classroom meetings
- **Web Enhanced:** Traditional class meetings with *required* web assignments
- **Web Companion:** Traditional class meetings with *supplemental* web assignments

Only the online and hybrid courses are included in this report and data analysis.

Web companion and web enhanced courses that utilize web based assignments in an otherwise conventional class would not be considered a distance education course for purposes of this report..

Academic Advising: Academic Advising is a student-centered process of learning through the development of interpersonal relationships. Initially, the advisor is the leader in the relationship querying and assessing the student's needs and taking into consideration all factors that may affect the student's ability to be successful in his/her academic career. Discussions regarding Career goals, personal issues, time management skills, motivation, discipline, timetables, and other skills such as technical skills are fundamental when the advisor is the team leader.

Student Support Services: Student Support Services for Online Learners should mirror the services we offer students who are enrolled in a traditional "face to Face" setting. Online learners should have the ability to apply and pay online, conduct assessment process, receive academic and career advising, financial aid counseling, conduct all aspects of registering online (adding and dropping courses, printing unofficial transcripts, program audits, and applying for graduation), academic tutoring, mentoring, and personal counseling or referrals. To be truly successful, NECC must create a student support services environment that provides an atmosphere conducive to a successful learning experience.

E-Tutoring: A web-based academic assistance program for students enrolled in targeted college courses where the focus is on helping students acquire and refine the skills that are needed to master the course content.

Student Preparedness: Student preparedness is the process by which a student who is new to online learning clearly understands the expected requirements of an online class, and make themselves ready by acquiring and developing the skills required to successfully complete an online class.

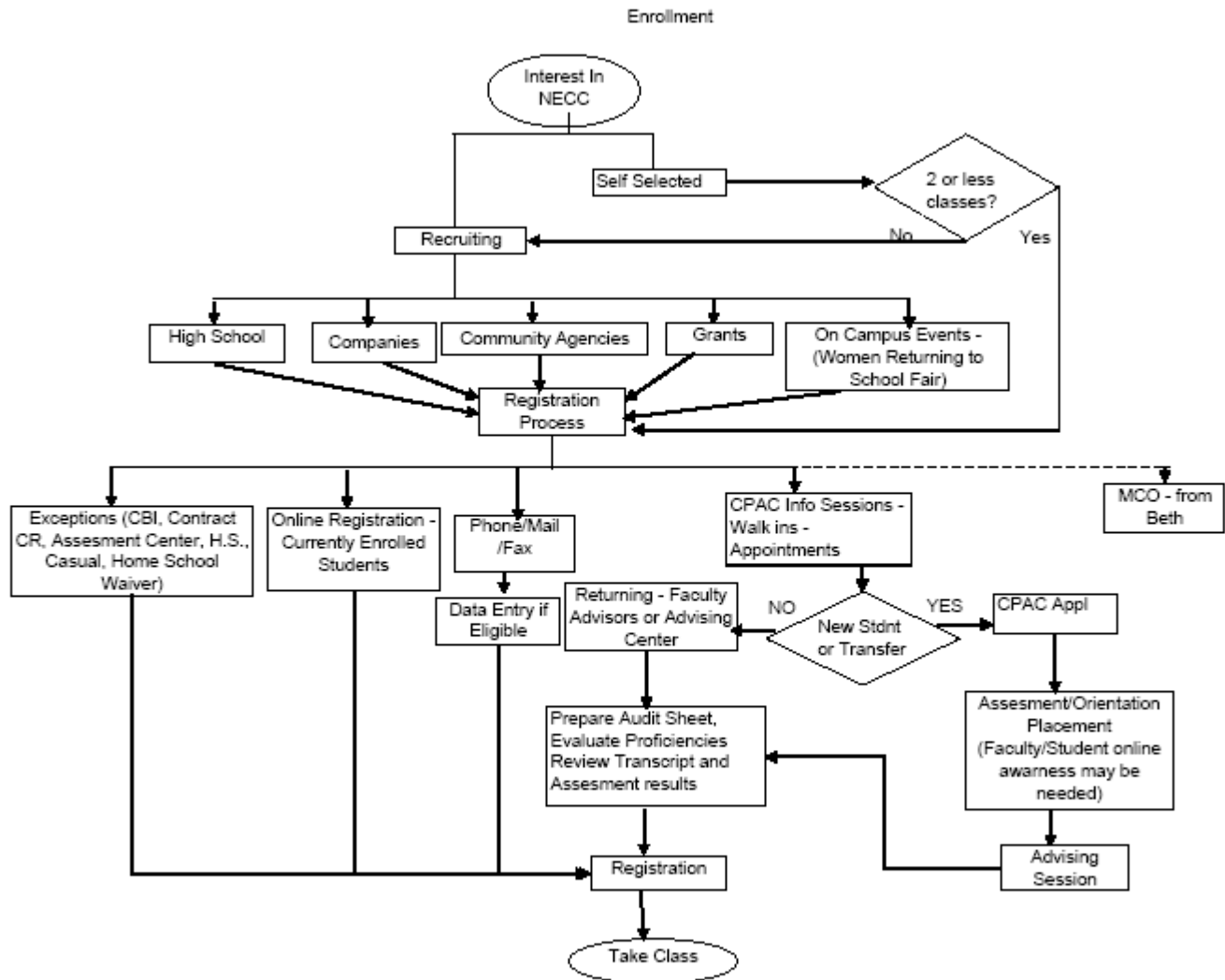
Faculty preparedness: Faculty preparedness is the process by which a faculty member who is new to online learning acquires and develops the skills required to successfully develop and manage an online class, including technical, pedagogical, content, and organizational skills needed for success.

Course Completion: Courses shall be considered completed when a student has successfully earned a grade of D or better.

Retention: Students' rate of persistence toward course/program completion.

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT REGISTRATION PROCESS

The team began their process by examining how students came to be enrolled in online courses here at NECC. The chart below is our attempt to draw a model of the process. It is quickly apparent that our diverse and flexible options for enrolling would present a challenge to anyone trying to build in any type of implementation strategy that would affect the student's choice of an online course. The many paths to registration would require many layers of intervention if done incorrectly.



The one simple conclusion drawn from this chart is that any changes in the process of registering for an online course must either be implemented at the one simple point of convergence, or at a dozen or more diverse points in the flowchart. Thus, the actual point of registration stands out as the only viable point of intervention.

ANALYSIS OF COMPLETION RATE DATA

The primary challenge related to analyzing student completion rate data was a need to develop a deeper understanding of the specific variables affecting student success rates. Initial anecdotal information was discussed by the team to help steer our efforts. Performance variables *suspected* to be impacting completion rates included a list of factors.

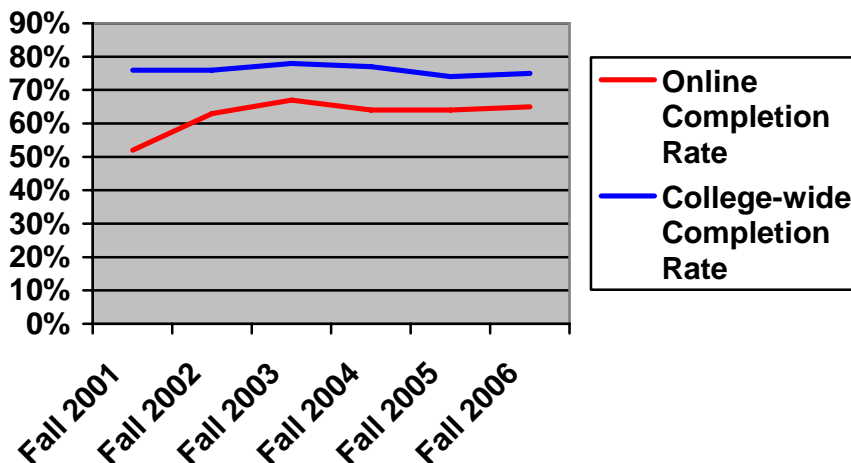
A few of the major student performance elements considered were:

- Adequate computer skills
- Utilizing the tools in WebCT
- Reliable internet service
- Technical difficulties
- Study skills
- Time management
- Self discipline
- Advising
- Inappropriate registrations
 - Late registrations
 - Forced to online by closed traditional sections
 - Poor self selection

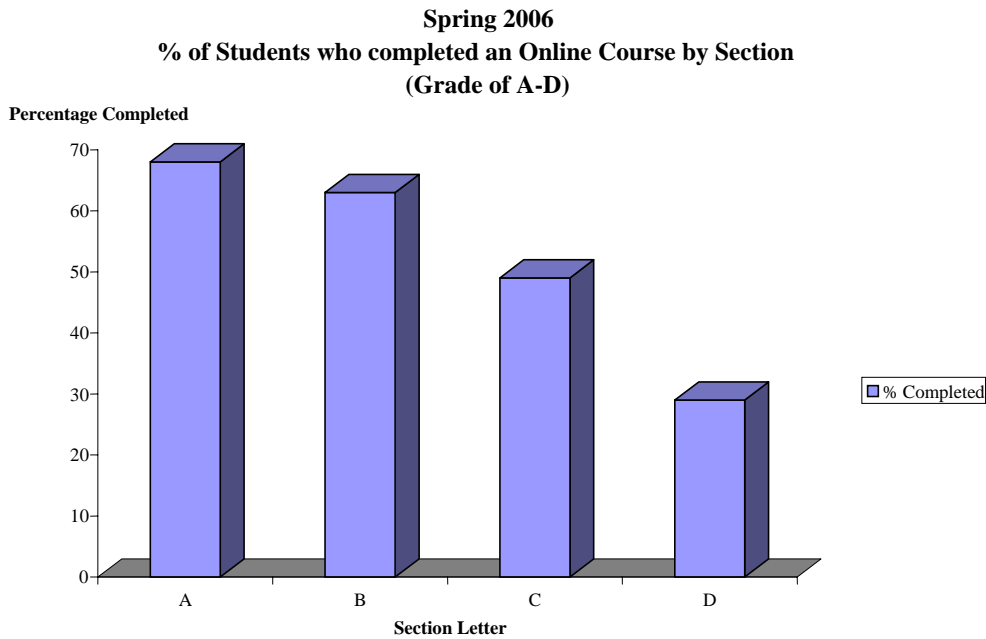
Institutional Research Data: Utilizing institutional completion rate data was the first step in developing a snapshot of our online students and how they perform in online courses. With the professional support of the NECC Institutional Research office, some important data elements were revealed. Our targeted data population was the spring 2006 semester.

Several important factors were revealed at this institutional data level.

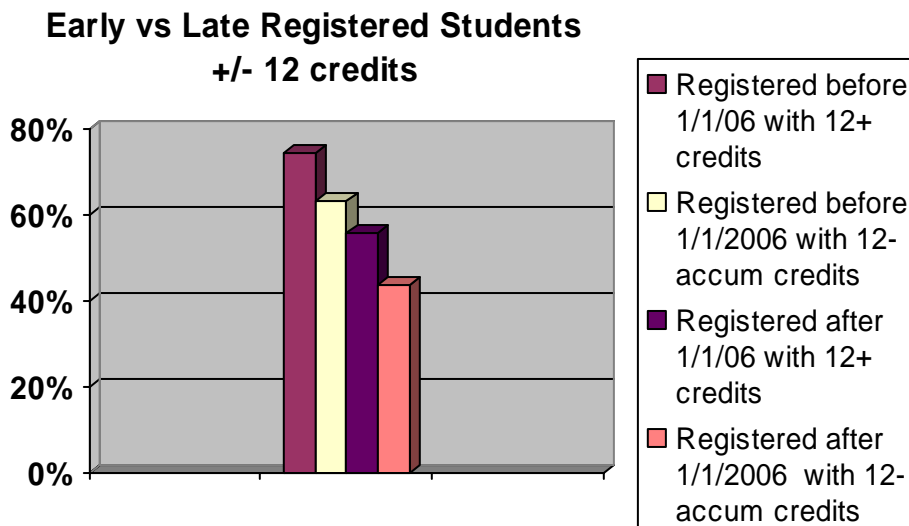
1. The overall completion rates for online courses have historically lagged the college wide completion rates by approximately 10%.



2. Students who register late had a lower completion rate. This is clearly indicated by a comparison of completion rates by section, with section “A “ always being the first registered by date, “B” the first overflow section added, and so on.



3: Early registered students with more academic experience (12 credits or more of prior college coursework), out performed students with less academic experience by approximately 13%. This gap swelled to 19% for late registered students.



Based on these institutional research factors, the Process Management Team determined several key points:

1. The completion rates were consistently lower for online courses.
2. Late registration was a factor in predicting lower student completion rates.
3. Lack of prior academic experience was a factor lowering student completion rates.

Faculty members on the team were of the unanimous opinion that these factors were **not**, by themselves, enough to account for the lower completion rates overall. In anecdotal discussion and brainstorming sessions, faculty felt strongly that many late registered students were achieving great success in online courses, as were many new students without prior college work.

The team determined that some additional data collection was a critical need in allowing us to further determine the specific factors that were causing some students to not complete. It was decided that if we could further detail the characteristics of non-completing students, refining the cohort for further analysis, that we could engineer more specific interventions and support services to directly improve student success.

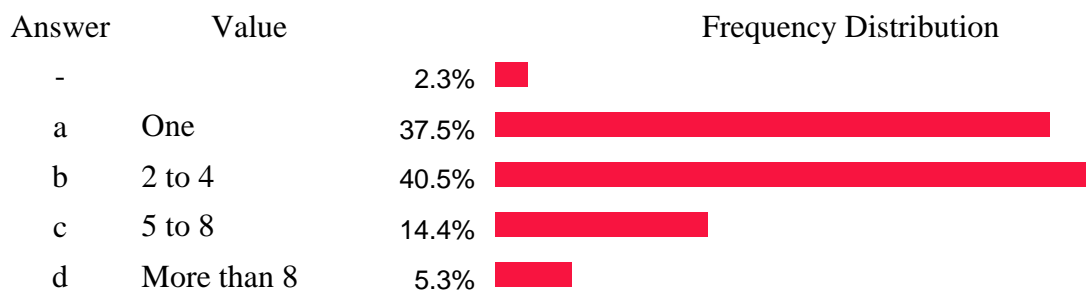
The team worked to author two comprehensive survey instruments designed to gather more detail about student success factors. Both faculty and students were surveyed during the first week of December 2006. Survey responses were very successful, with 92% (38) online faculty, and 33% (570) of the online students completing the online survey. Both response rates were well in excess of what is needed to achieve statistical relevance. Based on the very high response rates, we feel a very high degree of confidence in the survey results.

Survey Data: A great deal of very interesting data was gathered from both faculty and students. Full survey reports can be found in the appendix section of this report. For purposes of efficiency, we are only highlighting the data that is most relevant to the completion rate analysis here. The survey data, when compiled, gave strong credibility to several major student success factors, and also pointed us away from some factors that the team has expected to be major factors. The survey data ultimately was responsible for leading us to the right question to ask.

Key Student Survey Data:

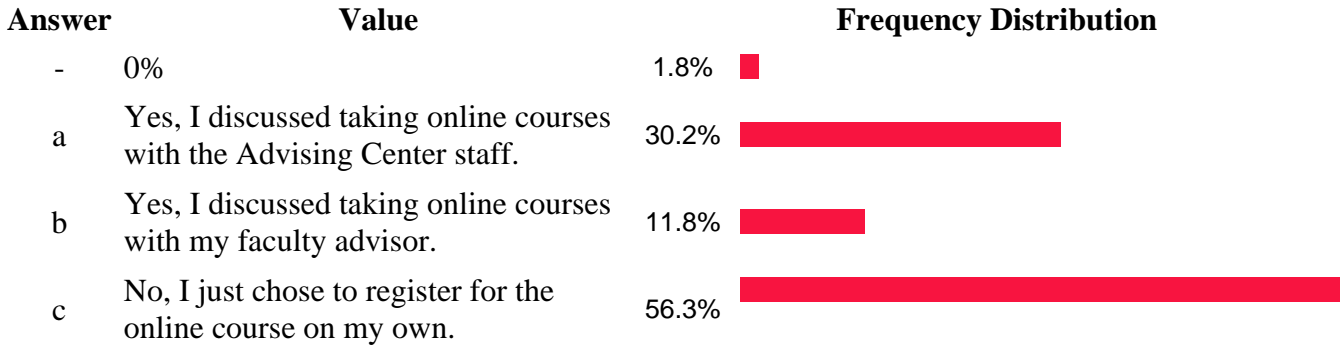
1. **37.5% of the students surveyed were taking their first online course.**

How many online courses have you taken at NECC?



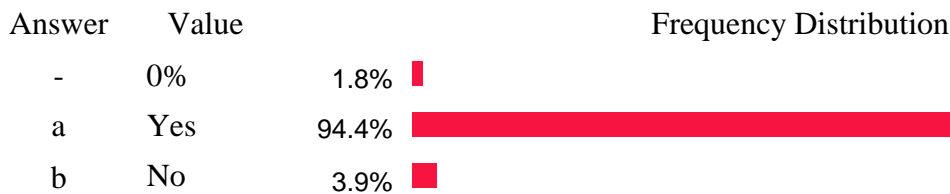
2. 56.3% of the online students have never discussed the option of online courses with an advisor.

Did you discuss the online course option with an advisor before registering for your first online course?



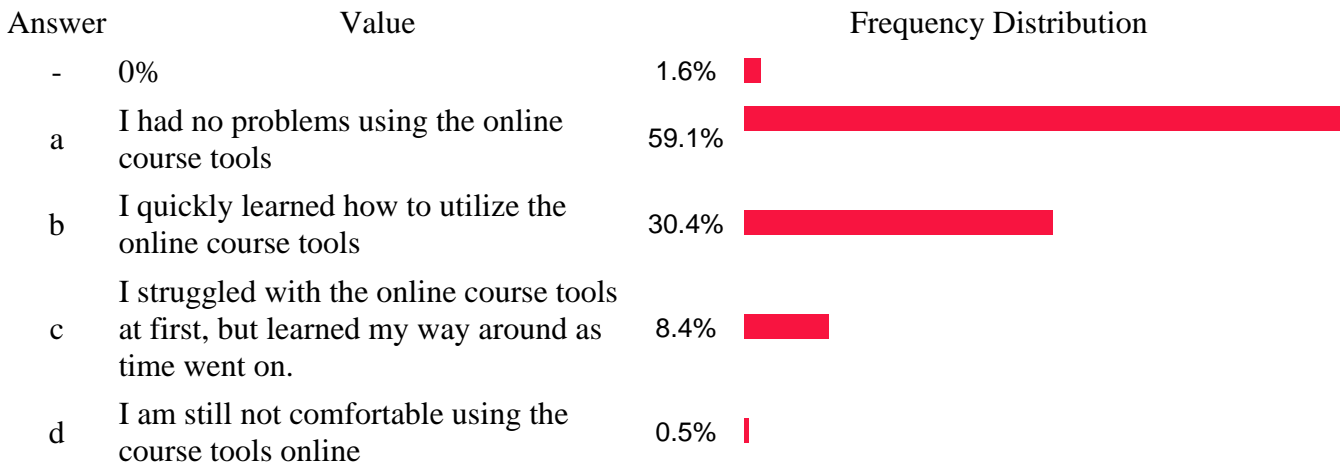
3. 94.4% of online students felt that their lack of computer skills was not a problem.

Do you feel that you have the computer skills needed to do well in online courses?



4. 89.5% of the students felt that the use of WebCT was not a problem for them.

The online courses at NECC utilize WebCT, a software platform with a number of online course tools. These tools include discussion boards, chat rooms, email, online quizzes, and electronic assignment submissions. Which answer best describes your comfort level using WebCT



4. Of the students who had failed to complete an online course, most blamed poor time management, poor self selection of online courses, and the difficulty of the course.

If you ever been dropped from, failed, or taken an incomplete in an online course, why do you feel that happened?
(choose all that apply)

Answer	Value	Cumulative Frequency Distribution
a	The course was too difficult	28.6%
b	I couldn't dedicate the time to keep up with the work	48.7%
c	I struggled with my computer skills	3.0%
d	Online courses are just not for me	19.5%

5. Most students (63.9%) had not read or utilized any of the available information about online courses before registering for one.

Did you utilize the information on the Distance Learning website before registering for your first online course?
(Choose all that apply)

Answer	Value	Cumulative Frequency Distribution
a	No, I never did.	63.9%
b	Yes , I took the student readiness survey online.	15.3%
c	Yes, I read the frequently asked questions.	16.5%
d	Yes, I read the Distance Learning Handbook online.	10.9%
e	Yes, I took the free Student Orientation Course online.	8.6%

Student Survey Conclusions: (see Appendix A for full survey results)

Many of the team’s anecdotal suspicions about the impact of computer skills, computer access, technical problems, WebCT usage, and internet access were significantly discounted by the data.

A very high proportion of online students are taking their first online course. This indicates that a great many students are willing to try one, but not always with a successful outcome.

Poor time management and a lack of self discipline were primary causes of non completion.

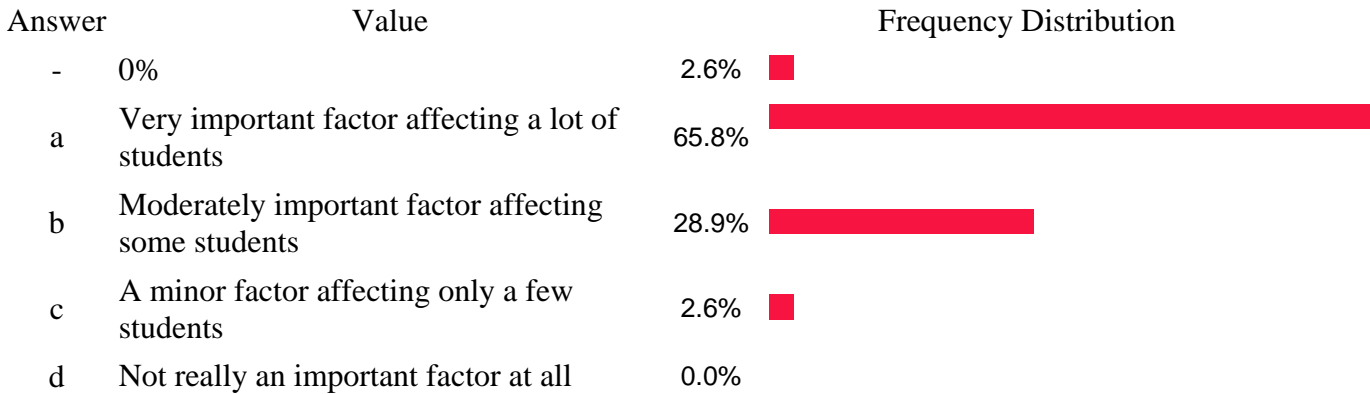
The failure of many students to avail themselves of proper advising combined with the failure to review the available information results in poor self selection of online courses.

Key Faculty Survey Data:

Results from the faculty survey very closely mirrored the student survey results, and served to confirm the relevance of several factors. In particular, three key elements were confirmed.

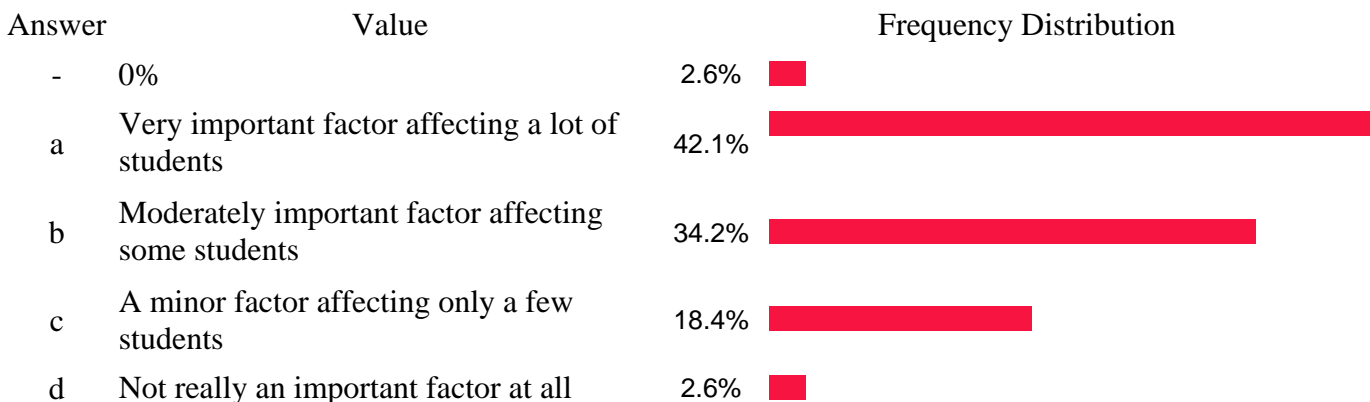
1. 94.7 % of online faculty felt that lack of self discipline was a major factor affecting student success.

Regarding your students who do not complete your online courses with a passing grade, how important a factor is a lack of the self direction and/or discipline needed to be successful in an online environment?



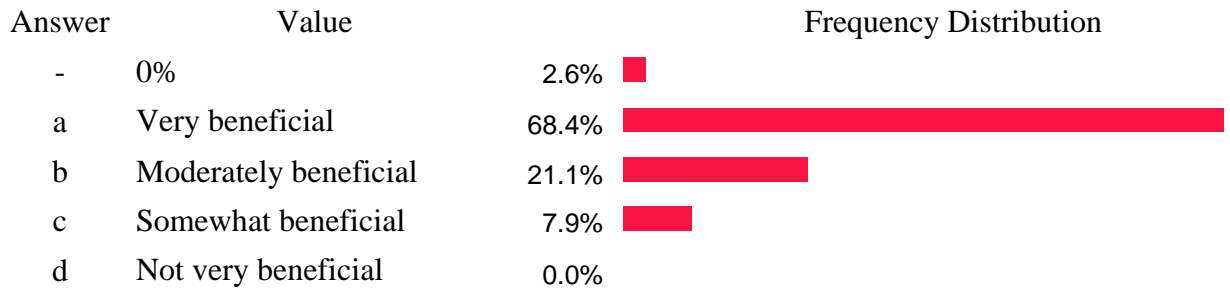
2. 76.3% of online faculty felt that the registration of inappropriate students was a significant factor affecting completion rates.

Regarding your students who do not complete your online courses with a passing grade, how important a factor is inappropriate registration of students who require face to face interaction to be successful?



3. Virtually all faculty responding felt that better screening during the advising process would be beneficial in improving completion rates.

How beneficial do you feel it would be to provide greater screening of potential online students during the advising process?



Faculty Survey Conclusions: (see Appendix B for full survey results)

Faculty strongly indicated that a lack of self discipline, a failure to participate in the advising process, and poor academic skills, results in inappropriate student registrations in online courses. This results in lower completion rates. Faculty also discounted the value of technical problems and computer skills as a major factor. The faculty survey indicated strongly that better screening of potential online students would be very beneficial in improving completion rates.



The Right Question to Ask:

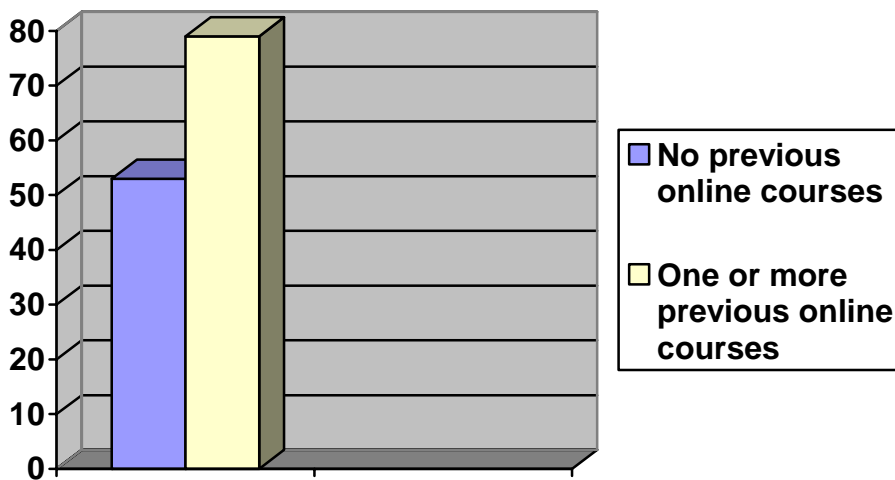
The elaborate data process described here led the team to ask one final and most important question.

A great many students are trying their first ever online course, and doing so without having been advised or reviewing the available information found in the and distance learning handbook and website.

What then, is the completion rate for students taking their first ever online course?

Answer: (Courtesy of the Institutional Research Office)

Completion Rates for First Time Online Students (Spring 2006)



With this final revelation, the team has identified the cohort of first time online students as the target group for our recommendations.

Students taking their first online course are completing at 53%. Students who have previously completed an online course successfully are completing at a 79% rate, well in excess of the college wide rates for traditional classes.

Improvement Theory:

The Improvement of Completion rates of Students in Online Courses derived from a group of data that have been collected over the years since Northern Essex Community College began offering Online Courses. Significant growth has occurred since the college began these courses and with growth the need for constant review of completion rates increased.

The plan to improve completion rates of students enrolled in Online Courses can only be addressed using the strategies that are being recommended.

- Increased Academic Advising services to Distance Education Students and students taking online courses
- Increased knowledge base of front line staff in regard to the demands of online courses
- Improved training for staff and faculty on how to effectively advise students choosing to take online courses

ACTION STEPS	NEEDS BEING ADDRESSED
1. Intrusive Academic Advising of all students who are registering for their first online course.	1. Students need to make informed decisions about Online courses and course load
2. Screening all students who register for their first online course using a series of questions and a check off box in the Banner System.	2. Educating students about the demands of Online courses
3. Intrusive Academic Advising of all students on probation or suspension to prevent registering for online courses without the approval of an advisor.	3. The need to monitor our “At Risk Population”
4. Conduct regular training sessions for front staff, faculty and professional staff	4. Staff need to become more proficient and informed in terms of good “Customer Service”
5. Modify Banner System to require students registering for their first online course to have an advisors approval	5. Improve Student Self Assessment of needed Skill Set
6. Have a designated Web-Advisor to provide Academic and Resource Advising to all of our students who take online courses and our Distance Ed population	6. The need to provide a mirrored support of Academic and Transfer Advising to our Online students as well as our Distance Ed students as well as the Implementation of Online Programs
7. Improve the Virtual Advising Center with web based advising tools, including real time chat options for students.	7. Problem Solving in Real Time

Plan of Operation:

The plan to improve completion and retention rates of students in Online Courses will be the responsibility of the College Community as a whole, but the brunt of the burden will fall directly on those staff and faculty who have direct contact with students. Whether a student is in the Advising and Registration phase or are the very beginning of their attendance in online courses, the appropriate Action Steps should be exercised.

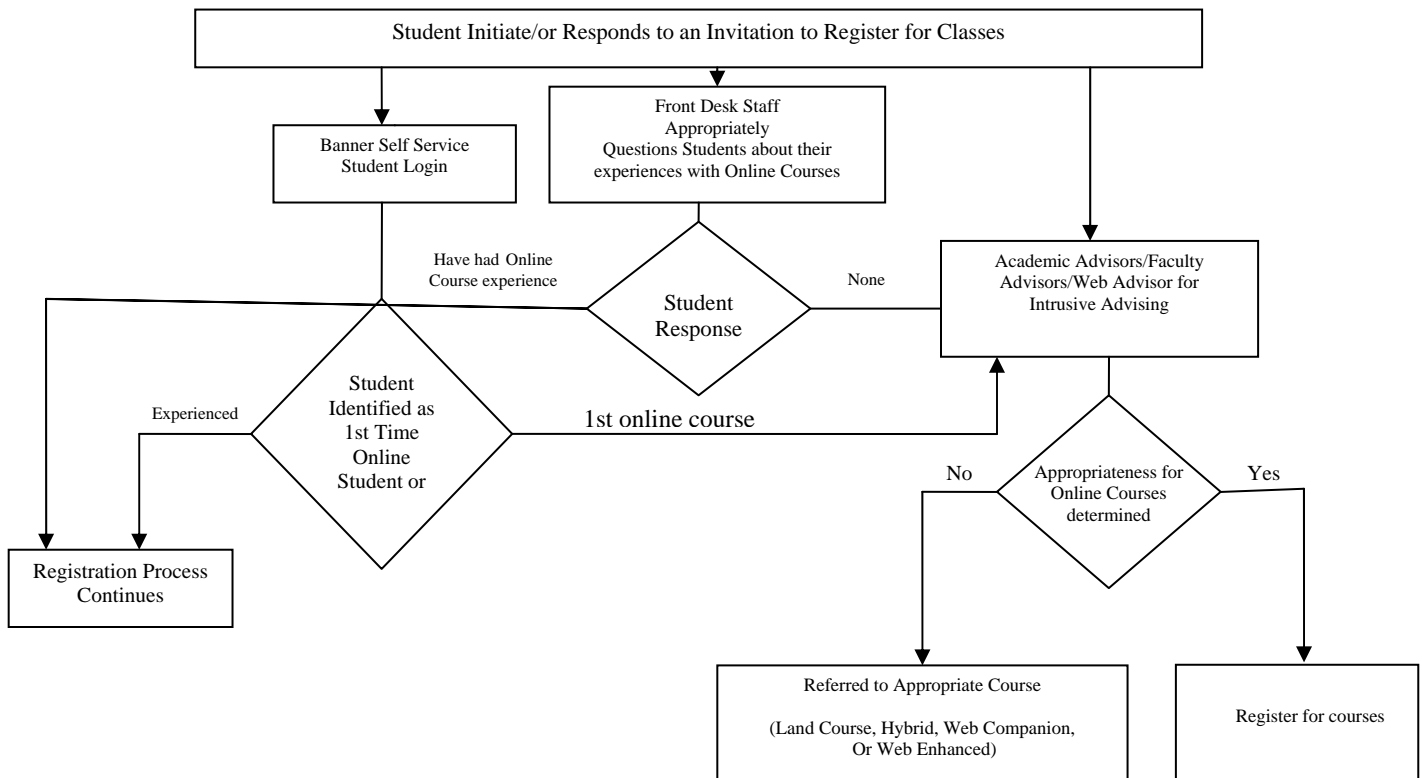
Feasibility:

We do not foresee any undue hardship on the college or departments to engraft this plan. Departments and Divisions currently own various parts of the responsibility for the recommended changes. Some additional resources for funding an Advisor's position will be needed at the college level.

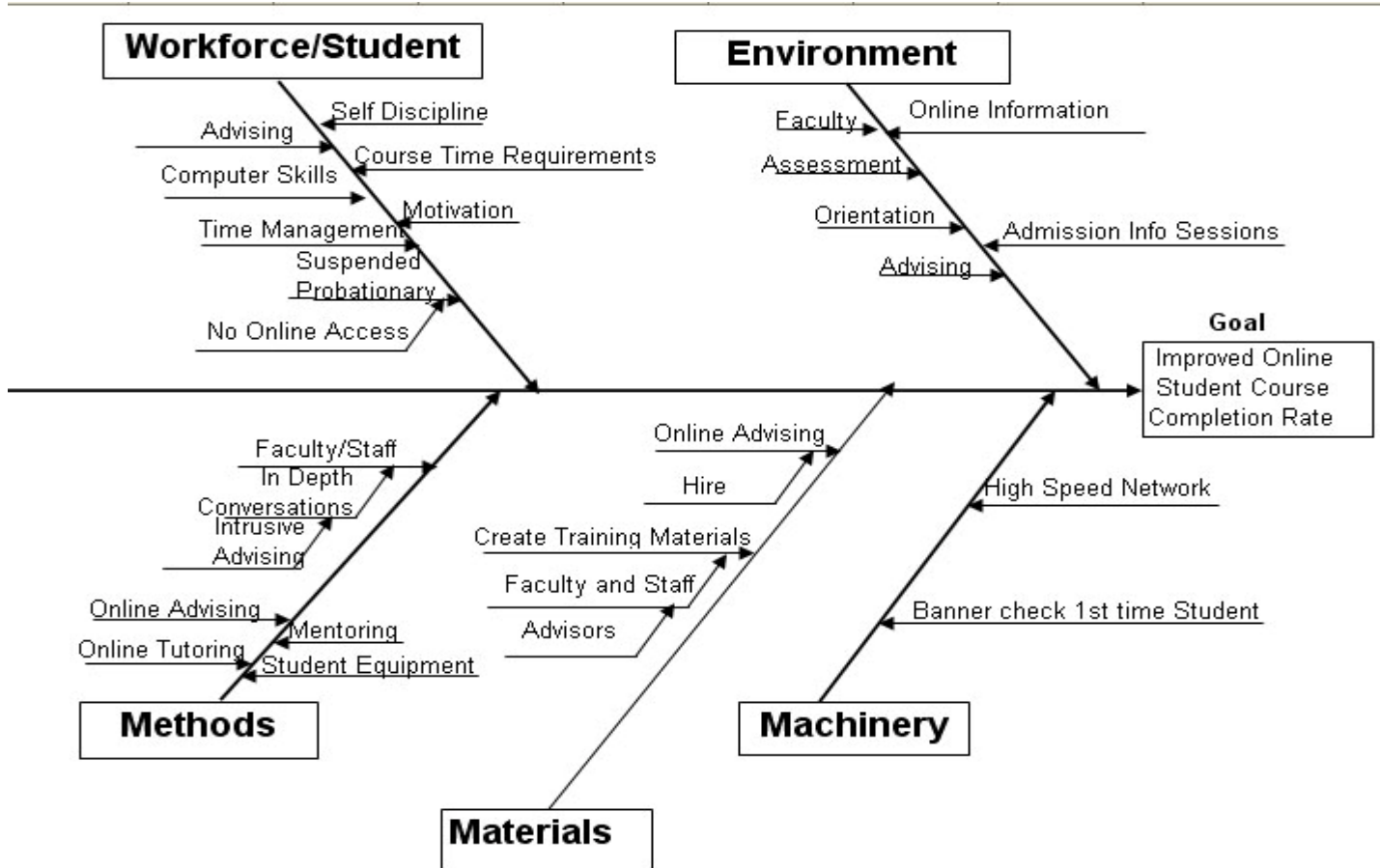
Decentralized Model of responsibilities:

Frontline staff, Professional Advisors, and Faculty will have a responsibility to provide all students and in particular first time online students with either the proper referral or academic advising in regard to the demands of Online Courses. Decentralized systems are absolutely essential in order to improve retention in Online Courses for both first time students and seasoned students.

This diagram depicts the Decentralized Information and Advising Services



This Ishikawa diagram the causes that will contribute to a positive effect in improved online course completion rates



Supplemental Online Student Success Improvements:

Concurrent with the specific advising recommendations, the team has worked to support a number of other supplemental enhancements to the online student experience. Some of this work results from the data revelations, other elements simply made a result of self improvement processes and industry best practices.

Improved Distance Learning Website:

CIT staff has been working to improve the Distance Learning Website. These improvements will include a much leaner and simplified navigation strategy. The new site will feature an entire section just for perspective online students with an improved readiness survey that provides very specific skills recommendations. The new site can be previewed at http://cit.necc.mass.edu/necctest/new_distance

The site is scheduled to go live with the beginning of the summer 2007 term.

E-Tutoring:

Beginning in the Fall of 2006, the Academic Resource and Tutoring Center participated in a state wide pilot to evaluate the viability of a new e-Tutoring system. The pilot was sponsored by Mass Colleges Online and was developed in partnership with the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium. The e-Tutoring system provides a platform which allows students to connect with real-time content specialists for via a web interface. The website can be found at www.eTutoring.org.

At this point in the pilot, all NECC students have been loaded into the CDLC system. Links to the e-Tutoring system have been posted on each student's WEBCT homepage; and the information about the availability of e-Tutoring services was distributed via student email accounts.

As of the end of the Fall Semester, a total of 74 NECC students had accessed e-Tutoring services. Final utilization statistics and student /faculty evaluations will be conducted at the end of the Spring Semester.

WebCT Upgrade:

CIT has begun the installation and testing of the latest version of WebCT. The new version will be called Blackboard Learning System, CE Enterprise Limited. The migration to the new system is a sophisticated and complex process. The new release is targeted for launch for the Fall 2007 semester.

From the user's perspective, the login usernames and passwords will be simplified. The integration of usernames and passwords with the MyNECC login will eliminate an additional layer of password confusion. Students and faculty will use one single username and password to access their online courses, student email, and Banner self service tools.

Cost Analysis:

The team recommendations are largely based on no cost or low cost changes to processes that are being implemented without the need for additional direct funding. While some staff time and effort will be required to make the recommended changes to the advising process and to implement Banner support for the advising requirement, the only cost items are actually found within the Academic Advising Center budget requests. The team supports the following Advising Center requests.

Staffing	FY 08 Costs
New E-Advising position	\$49,000.
Software	
ProvideSupport Virtual Software (10 operator license)	\$500.

Timelines for Implementation:

ACTION STEPS	Timeline for Implementation
1. Intrusive Academic Advising of all students who are registering for their first online course.	November 2007
2. Screening all students who register for their first online course using a series of questions and a check off box in the Banner System.	November 2007
3. Intrusive Academic Advising of all students on probation or suspension to prevent registering for online courses without the approval of an advisor.	November 2007
4. Conduct regular training sessions for front staff, faculty and professional staff	Summer and Fall 2007
5. Modify Banner System to require students registering for their first online course to have an advisors approval	Summer 2007
6. Have a designated Web-Advisor to provide Academic a Resource Advising to all of our students who take online courses and our Distance Ed population	July 2007 (FY08)
7. Improve the Virtual Advising Center with web based advising tools, including real time chat options for students.	Ongoing

MONITORING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:

Continuous Cycle of Improvement: Institution data reports on student completion rates will help to drive a process of continuing improvement.

a) How success will be measured

Quantitative

Increase completion rates in online courses
Increase advising support for online students
Decrease inappropriate student registrations in online courses

Qualitative:

Student and Faculty Surveys

b) How systems will be monitored and evaluated

Monitoring of online student completion rate data
Annual progress reports submitted to Steering Committee
Annual outcome report submitted to Steering Committee, with recommendations for continued Improvements

c) How faculty, staff, and students will continue to provide guidance

Repeat student and faculty surveys after one year
Collaboration with Departmental Chairs on an on-going basis

Team Members

Elizabeth Wilcoxson , Assistant Dean, Business, Math, Science, Technology, Humanities, and Social Sciences	Team Co-Sponsors
Joseph Rizzo , Professor, Behavioral Sciences	
Alan Foucault , Director, The Center for Instructional Technology and Distance Learning	Team Leader
Grace Dimmick , Associate Dean, Academic Affairs, Transfer, Articulation, and Advising	Team Member
Kathy Proietti , Dept. Chairperson, Computer Technology and Engineering	Team Member
Kelly Lalonde , Coordinator, Accounting	Team Member
James Gustafson , Professor, Philosophy	Team Member
Charles Diggs , Associate Director, Enrollment Services and Recruitment	Team Member
Sandra Kauffman , Coordinator, Hospitality Management	Team Member
Kathy Ronaldson , Process Management Advisor	Team Member

Acknowledgements:

The team would like to express our appreciation to the following for their continued support of this project.

David F. Hartleb, NECC President: His insight, vision, and support in moving the college is largely responsible for moving the college forward with the concept of continuous improvement.\

Dr. Stan Jensen, Process Management Consultant: who provided his expertise and the tools needed to implement this project

Tom Fallon, Dean of Institutional Research and Planning: His professional and timely research and data support was instrumental in formulating our data analysis processes. The analysis of institutional completion rate data will continue to be a major focal point in the determining the long term effectiveness of our Improvement Theories.

Jackie Long-Goding, Dean of Health Professions: Her comprehensive survey and interview data helped by providing the team with early input and served as a foundation as we developed out our own survey tools. Her generosity in sharing the research made our work more efficient, and demonstrated her commitment to the improvement of online learning here at NECC.

Dr. David B. Kelley, Dean of Instructional and Student Support: His continued leadership and support of distance learning as a mechanism for expanding access to educational opportunity at NECC has propelled the drive for excellence in both our educational offerings, and the development of support services for our students.