

Academic Quality White Paper

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2019, UMUC Chief Academic Officer (CAO) Alan Drimmer asked me to create a work group to explore the issue of Academic Quality at UMUC from a faculty perspective. The AAB, which I chair, is the university's shared governance organization, established to provide academic advice to the CAO and university president. (It is described more fully in Appendix A.1.)

The work group included volunteers from both The Undergraduate School (TUS) and The Graduate School (TGS). Representatives from non-faculty stakeholder groups across UMUC also attended the work group meetings. The goal of adding stakeholder representatives was twofold: to increase the probability that the work group would learn of Academic Quality initiatives already underway and to make it more likely that any work group recommendations would be supported within the broad range of functions that impact Academic Quality at the university. (A full list of work group members is found in Appendix A.2.)

The initial charter for the work group called for it to produce a short list of priority metrics. Three original goals were set:

- Goal 1 – Survey internal and external stakeholders.
 - Use a survey instrument or some version of a focus group.
- Goal 2 – Develop a prioritized list of factors that impact Academic Quality.
 - Identify the top three to five influencers.
- Goal 3 – Identify a prioritized list of metrics.
 - Relate each metric to a Goal 2 factor.

As the effort progressed, it became clear that metrics could not be considered in isolation. The overall objective of the work group was expanded to include not only metrics but also a broader contextual framework and a list of actionable Academic Quality initiatives.

Over a two-month period, work group members focused on gathering the UMUC community's opinions regarding Academic Quality. Responses to questionnaires from work group faculty and stakeholder members were collected and analyzed. Particular attention was given to the opinions of the broader faculty community. A series of in-person and online video discussions with faculty groups was conducted, and an active online discussion forum was held with geographically dispersed UMUC adjunct faculty.

In addition, members of the work group researched the academic literature on Academic Quality, and public information from eight higher education competitors was also examined. (Appendix A.5 contains a reference list of the literature reviewed. Appendix A.4 carries a list of competitor institutions.) This research was not meant to be exhaustive but, rather, sought to provide a glimpse into the state of the academic literature and current practices at other institutions. It also was helpful in identifying approaches that have not worked well elsewhere.

Finally, a brief review was made of UMUC's previous efforts involving Academic Quality. Lessons learned from those undertakings influenced the work group's approach and the resulting report.

Questions arose among the online adjunct faculty community as to the roles of faculty and of UMUC as an institution. These are summarized in Appendix A.3, which also provides a high-level summary of the overall online conversation.

Based on the findings of the work group, this report makes three recommendations:

- Establishment of regular, semi-annual reports to the Academic Advisory Board on the status of administration efforts associated with Academic Quality in order to continue the dialogue that was started by the work group.
- A first set of recommended metrics should be created and tracked.
- A first set of initiatives for action should be considered for implementation.

These recommendations are discussed in more depth in the appropriate work group sections of the report. UMUC may already be addressing some of these highlighted metrics, although not necessarily in a fully visible manner. It is also possible that additional metrics and/or initiatives not on the proposed priority list are in progress and could be included. One of the work group's major objectives was to engage with faculty on the issue of Academic Quality; the takeaway was that faculty have a high level of interest in this topic. A second objective was to elevate the visibility of Academic Quality at the university, and we feel this was accomplished.

What We Did Not Try to Address

A formal research report was not among the goals of the work group. Rather, its sole intent was to solicit input from UMUC faculty on issues related to Academic Quality. The work group generated suggested action steps and it increased the visibility of Academic Quality in conversations at UMUC. Among the issues that surfaced during the discussions was the need to define Academic Quality. However, we learned from UMUC's previous unsuccessful attempts at gauging Academic Quality: There was too much emphasis on getting the definition right and not enough on establishing initial action steps.

One result of the Work Group's efforts over the last three months was to produce a list of potential metrics and initiatives. With input from the work group members, priorities were assigned to each one and they included the top three to five noted in our initial recommendations. Next steps would include using the work associated with those action steps to provide additional context for a more formal definition of Academic Quality.

Why Is Academic Quality Important to UMUC?

UMUC's "product" is intimately tied to the quality of its academics.

The adult-serving higher education marketplace is increasingly competitive. To distinguish itself, UMUC must maintain and elevate its reputation for quality and high academic standards. In other words, UMUC needs to be a high-quality provider compared to the competition.

In order to keep and advance Academic Quality, it is important that UMUC stakeholders have a shared understanding of what Academic Quality means, how it is measured, and the way in which it serves as an indicator of how well the university is doing.

Defining and measuring Academic Quality is also critical in supporting senior management decision making, in both academic and operational areas, and to ensure the university's competitiveness through a high quality, value-add product offering.

Academic Quality and Academic Integrity

Much of the approach toward Academic Quality was patterned after UMUC's efforts relating to Academic Integrity.

Both areas benefited from volunteer work groups that largely consisted of faculty and from faculty support from TGS and TUS. Both groups worked with the Academic Advisory Board to reach out to adjunct faculty using Engage, the university's intranet, and to open discussions to solicit faculty opinions. This general model, pioneered by TGS Associate Dean Doug Harrison, seems to work well and may be useful as a process to build on and refine.

In addition, Academic Quality and Academic Integrity are clearly interwoven. The issue of Academic Integrity surfaced multiple times during Academic Quality discussions. How Academic Integrity is handled has a significant impact on the level of Academic Quality that can be achieved. If students' work is not their own, it becomes problematic to measure whether Learning Outcomes have been achieved.

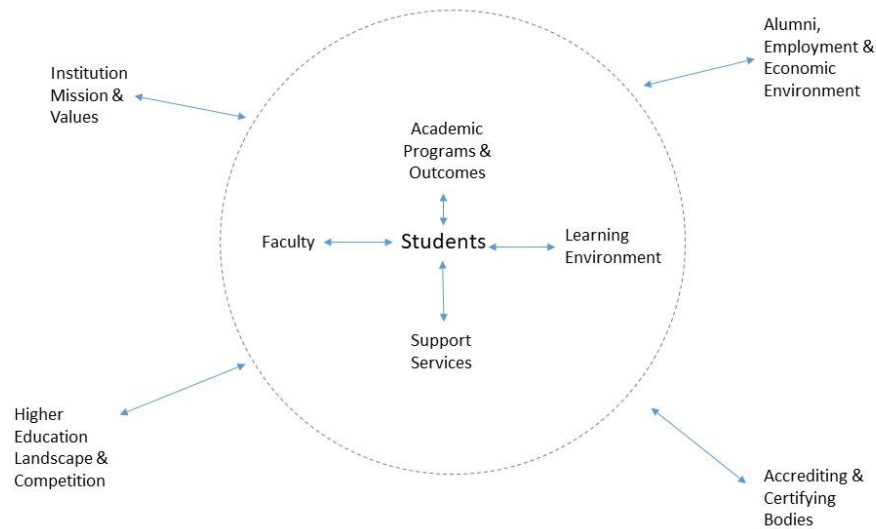
Because the ongoing Academic Integrity effort has now moved to an implementation state, we did not include specific suggestions for action or measurement relating to Academic Integrity as part of this report.

Academic Quality Context Chart

This chart represents a first effort at defining the major impacts on Academic Quality. While we expect this landscape to evolve over time, even in this initial breakdown it provides useful context for areas to which attention should be paid.

We divided the factors affecting Academic Quality roughly into those that directly impact the student experience, shown inside the circle, and those that have a broader impact on UMUC as an institution, shown outside the circle.

Academic Quality Factors



Direct Impact Factors. Students sit at the center of Academic Quality objectives. The current trend to refer to students as customers or clients does not sufficiently capture the complex relationship that exists between adult learners and post-secondary educational institutions. We see it as more meaningful to consider the impact of Academic Quality factors on students, without reducing that intricacy into a client-service provider relationship.

We have divided the factors that directly impact students into four broad categories:

- Faculty
- Academic Programs & Outcomes
- Learning Environment
- Support Services

Faculty. Faculty are students' primary point of contact, and they play a central role in creating and maintaining Academic Quality. They do so through their presence in the classroom, by developing positive relationships with students, and through consistent and high-quality grading and feedback.

Academic Programs & Outcomes. This area includes program design and outcomes, course design and outcomes, assessments, and course content. At UMUC, there is a partnership among the program leadership, the associated subject matter experts (SMEs), and the growing centralized group of instructional designers (IDs). For the purposes of this report, we include each of these groups within the Academic Programs & Outcomes area.

Learning Environment. On a predominantly online learning landscape, factors beyond faculty become more significant than they do in a traditional school setting. This is especially true of the Learning Environment, which includes the learning management system (LMS), chatbots (or avatars) if present, and other tools that support and enhance online delivery. To an extent, practical adaptive learning tailored to the specific needs of students also falls within the Learning Environment.

Support Services. Within this area are advising, the registrar's office (including both course registration and transcript processing), library services, faculty development, and the support technology infrastructure that provides student information systems, tutoring, and external and internal online/web support.

Indirect Impact Factors. These are factors that affect UMUC more as an institution and, as such, touch students less directly. Some of these factors are external in nature, including the economic environment. Others are internal, among them the *Institution Mission & Values*.

UMUC is part of a rapidly changing academic ecosystem with many moving pieces, one of which is *Higher Education Landscape & Competition*. In this area, certain for-profit schools are appearing and disappearing rapidly while others are transitioning to a not-for-profit status. At the same time, public schools are adding online capability, either by developing it themselves or by purchasing the technology of other private institutions. Within this shifting ecosystem, the way UMUC defines its *Institution Mission & Values* must be articulated clearly and, over time, re-examined on a regular basis.

Accrediting & Certifying Bodies impact how Academic Quality is defined both institution-wide and within specific fields where employers may value students having specific credentials.

The vast majority of UMUC students pursue degrees in order to positively impact their employment opportunities. For this reason, the *Alumni, Employment & Economic Environment* is a critical external factor. The overall state of the economy and, more specifically, the qualities that employers seek in graduates will impact the direct factors noted earlier. We also want to know whether our alumni valued their UMUC education at UMUC.

Academic Quality Oversight Recommendation

In looking at previous efforts related to Academic Quality, we noted the importance of having senior leadership assign Academic Quality a high priority on an ongoing basis. This led to our first recommendation.

Recommendation No. 1. The Chief Academic Officer should be responsible for reporting to the Academic Advisory Board on a semi-annual basis the status of administration efforts associated with Academic Quality.

To accomplish this, the Chief Academic Officer will identify to the AAB individuals, either within Academic Affairs or within the larger UMUC community, who have responsibility for the nine key areas of importance identified in the Academic Quality Context Chart. Topics to be included in an initial meeting could include:

- Identification of metrics from the proposed priority list, as well as other metrics deemed important, which could serve as the basis for an Academic Quality dashboard;
- Selection of and a plan for initiative implementation that senior leadership agrees to move forward on;
- Impact of Academic Quality objectives on the then-current strategic plan.

Discussion of Academic Recommendations

This section of the report details the top items identified as metric and initiative priorities. Appendix A.3 contains a complete table of academic recommendations, but even a quick perusal of the table reveals that not every factor from the Academic Context Chart has an associated metric or initiative.

The table has been divided into factors, priorities, (denoted as “A” for top priority and “B” for secondary priority), and metrics. A suggested next step would be to come up with metrics and/or initiatives for each major factor as makes sense.

Metrics are the measurements that we can use to indicate how well the university is doing on the Academic Quality front. Eventually these metrics could be incorporated into a more formal dashboard. For metrics to be useful over time, it will be important that they are:

- *Generated automatically.* If manually created, they are likely to be dropped eventually under the weight of competing operational demands.
- *Made visible in an organizationally transparent fashion.* The most powerful implementations push these measurements onto public-facing web pages.

Recommendation No. 2: Track and communicate the following metrics:

- Employer perception of UMUC quality and competencies relative to respective workplaces.
- Student retention percentage.
- Student diversity percentages.
- Student course completion percentages.

Note: if there is institutional capacity for initial implementation of additional metrics, that would be a plus.

Initiatives, meanwhile, are projects that need to be accomplished and/or implemented to support Academic Quality. In some cases, the completion of initiatives will need to occur before meaningful metrics can be generated. The initiatives area is the focus of the next recommendation.

Recommendation No. 3: Give priority to the following actions:

- Develop a university-wide (or school-wide) definition of expectations for faculty presence in the classroom.
- Provide guidance and training on best practices in grading and feedback. (The latter is particularly important for ELM classes that allow resubmissions.)

- Develop a remedial program focused on students' ability to do academic work at the appropriate college level. This is particularly relevant to English as a Second Language and general writing skills.
- Investigate how to develop a more robust mentoring relationship with students. This effort is likely to involve faculty, academic program offices, and advising.

Appendix A.1 – Academic Advisory Board (AAB)

The Academic Advisory Board (AAB) serves as the faculty shared-governance advisory body to the provost and president of the university. As such, the AAB is 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.

A shared-governance process is mandated by the Maryland State Board of Regents for public universities in the State of Maryland, including University of Maryland Global Campus. While final authority for making decisions resides in the Board of Regents, and from it to each institutional president, the goal of shared governance is “informed participation and collaboration by faculty, students, and staff.”

More information about shared governance and the other shared-governance organizations at the university, such as the Adjunct Faculty Association, Student Advisory Council, and various staff advisory councils, is on the university's external web page and its internal social networking site, Engage.

The AAB has 10 voting members and an ex officio non-voting liaison to the administration. Its members represent the various academic stakeholders at UMUC: adjunct faculty, collegiate faculty, librarians, overseas collegiate faculty (from both Europe and Asia), and program chairs. The board's meetings are held online each month. They alternate between two start times: early morning in the Eastern Time zone and late afternoon in the Eastern Time zone. This is to accommodate members who are based overseas (i.e., are non-local to UMUC's Largo, Maryland, campus).

Appendix A.2 – Academic Quality Work Group Membership

The Undergraduate School (TUS)

Alba Beckford, Academic Specialist
 Stephanie Blaher, Academic Specialist
 Alison Goodrich, Program Chair
 Gretchen Jones, Associate Dean
 Steve Killings, Program Chair
 Kim Miller, Director, Learning Outcome Assessment

Dan Mintz, Program Chair, AAB Chair
 Peter Munger, Program Chair
 Chris Schultz, Collegiate Faculty, AAB Member
 Jennifer Thompson, Program Chair

The Graduate School (TGS)

Terry Cooper, Academic Specialist
 Michael Frank, Collegiate Faculty
 Doug Harrison, Associate Dean
 Mary Bryant Jackson, Academic Specialist
 Sarah Rothschild, Collegiate Faculty, AAB Secretary
 Roza Selimyan, Program Chair
 Brandi Shatto, Program Chair

Other

Andrew Boone, Associate Vice Provost, European Operations
 Craig Caplan, Learning Design and Solutions (LD&S)
 Melissa Foge, Librarian
 Dan Gallagher, Academic Director, Research and Writing, Learning Design and Solutions (LD&S)
 Martina Hansen, Vice President of Student Retention
 Michelle Harrison, Director of Advising
 Chimere Jones, Director of Quality Management, CILSS
 Dawn Kemp, Acting Director of Faculty Training & Development

APPENDIX A.3 – Online Discussion

Factors	Priority	(M)etric or (I)nitiative	Recommendations
Faculty	A	I	Develop university-wide (or school-wide) definition of expectations for faculty presence in the classroom.
Faculty	A	I	Provide guidance and training on to how to grade and how to provide feedback. (The latter is particularly important for ELM classes that allow resubmissions.)

Students	A	I	Put a remedial program in place focused on students' ability to do academic work at the appropriate college level. This is particularly relevant for English as a Second Language and general writing skills.
Students	A	I	Investigate how to develop a more robust mentoring relationship with students. This is likely to involve teaching faculty, academic program offices, and advising.
Academic Programs	B	I	Re-examine the approach to course content. Open Education Resources (curated OERs) + Self-publishing (Publishing Pod) + 3rd Party Provided materials (textbooks and other materials). This should include video and other non-textual content that is not in print.
Academic Programs	B	I	Embed a more standardized approach to rubrics.
Academic Programs	B	I	Design an assessment process for achieving learning goals (more frequently than the APR process every five years).
Employer	B	I	Make courses relevant to employers' needs.
Faculty	B	I	Develop the capability to identify grading outliers to enable further review.
Faculty	B	I	Put into place a better defined and more transparent evaluation of faculty that impacts on the class assignment process.
Employers	A	M	Understand the employer perception of the university's quality and competencies relative to respective workplaces.

Students	A	M	Track and communicate retention percentage.
Students	A	M	Track and communicate diversity percentages.
Students	A	M	Track and communicate course completion percentage.
Academic Programs	B	M	Track and communicate the percentage of assessments updated this semester.
Faculty	B	M	Track and communicate the percentages of faculty who are very satisfied versus those that are dissatisfied.
Faculty	B	M	Have faculty (and program chairs) evaluate programs.
Students	B	M	Track and communicate the percentages of students very satisfied versus those that are dissatisfied.
Students	B	M	Track the number of graduates this semester.
Students	B	M	Track and communicate the percent of graduates very satisfied versus those that are dissatisfied.
Students	B	M	Track the employment rate of graduates
Students	B	M	Gauge the salary impact for students.
Students	B	M	Assess levels of student debt associated with school costs.
Students	B	M	Track certifications earned and percentage of students who passed.
Students	B	M	Calculate the percent of students who return to the university for further education and had received a previous UMUC degree.
Students	B	M	Track student time to degree.

Students	B	M	Track student progress toward graduation.
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Questions that generated discussion leading to the recommendations:

1. Clarify relationships among instructional design, programs, collegiate faculty, and adjunct faculty when designing (and potentially creating) course content.
2. What exactly do we mean when we refer to changing faculty's role from the Sage on the Stage to the Guide on the Side? This relates to how learning is delivered, via faculty, the learning management system, or associated course materials.
3. How do we balance/define the importance of job competency-focused outcomes versus classical liberal education-focused outcomes?
4. How do we resolve the tension between learning-focused results (competency-based implementation) versus time-based semesters?

Appendix A.4 – Competitor List

American Public University System
Arizona State University Online
Capella University
Penn State World Campus
Purdue University Global
Southern New Hampshire University
Walden University
Western Governors University

APPENDIX A.5 – Literature Review

When initially researching, we targeted recent literature on Academic Quality that focused on both higher education and online or distance education. Many of the articles dealt specifically with students or faculty perceptions of quality. Faculty and student perceptions are valuable and easy to capture with surveys, but they are subjective. There is not a standardized way to collect the information. Therefore, perceptions are not necessarily practical for objective definitions or specific metrics of academic quality.

While reading through the literature, we looked for definitions of Academic Quality, areas of focus, and specific metrics to track. The definition of Academic Quality shifts, depending on the specific stakeholder viewpoint. In his dissertation, Shouba (2017) notes that quality is open-ended in nature, which means that students, faculty, business leaders, and other stakeholders will have different priorities, be they job placement, lifelong learning, or graduation rates. These priorities are not necessarily competing, but complexity becomes inevitable when trying to set a specific definition.

Another difficulty in defining Academic Quality is that it spans the entire higher education system and includes system inputs, outputs, and processes. The system inputs can encompass faculty

development and training and the infrastructure involved with delivering higher education. The system processes include instruction and learning, while the system outputs are graduates.

Few of the articles we read attempted a succinct definition of Academic Quality. In fact, we found two definitions: “tangible benefits gained from a collegiate experience” and “the value or outcome that is sought through efficient processes and for which the institution is accountable” (Eaton, 2007, p. 3; Pogliano, 2015, p. 14). Both of those definitions are vague and neither is particularly helpful. Since there is no consensus on a definition across the literature, we will need to determine what quality looks like to us.

The literature did have factors and metrics that we can use to guide us in coming up with our definition and direction of Academic Quality.

FACTORS – From the Literature	Place in Academic Quality Factors Chart
Institutional Resources	Support Services
Curriculum & Instruction	Academic Programs & Outcomes, Faculty
Faculty Support & Development	Support Services
Student Support	Support Services
Student Learning Outcomes	Academic Programs & Outcomes
Faculty Perceptions	Faculty
Course & Program Design	Academic Programs & Outcomes
Accreditation	Accrediting & Certifying Bodies
Student Experience	Students
Stakeholder Perceptions/Institutional Reputation	Higher Education Landscape, Employment & Economic Environment

Institutional Mission/Values	Institution Mission & Values
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In the literature, the factors cited in specific reports or articles depended on the perspective and, occasionally, were more specific than the ones named here. For this summary, I combined some factors in order to consolidate the main areas of focus found across the literature. For example, some of the factors we included fell within others (classroom technology and institutional funding within institutional resources) and some factors we included as one bullet point on the list (course design and program design). Therefore, while these factors are areas upon which we can focus our attention, we can think broadly or narrowly about what we want these factors to look like to us specifically.

We found many factors that went into academic quality but fewer specific metrics that were being tracked:

METRICS
Student Retention/ Graduation Rates
Job Placement Rates
Student Course/ Program Evaluations
Student Assessments
Faculty Development
External Rankings
Employer Feedback
Student-to-Instructor Ratio
Institutional Technology/ Resources

From this list, there are items we are already tracking, including student retention and accreditation; items that we are already reviewing, such as student evaluations and OER refresh; and items that we could look into tracking or track more in-depth, among them job placement and faculty development.

One reason there are fewer specific metrics of Academic Quality than there are for areas of focus is a lack of established guideposts or benchmarks for the data being collected. For instance, student evaluations are collected on an institutional basis but are not shared between organizations. While student retention and graduation rates have specific data points that can be collected, how would we quantify faculty development or the student experience?

The *CHLOE2: Changing Landscape of Online Education* report showed a common gap between ideal quality indicators that the surveyed chief online officers in the survey would like to track and the actual data that is being collected and tracked and collected at their organizations. The most common reasons cited for not collecting data of quality metrics were the difficulty in obtaining non-institutional data for comparisons and the dearth of resources to do so. Other reasons included a lack of interest in specific data points and a lack of established benchmarks in specific areas (Legon & Garrett, 2018). There should be a third CHLOE report released later this year.

For this report, we attempted to look broadly at Academic Quality. As we narrow down our definition and focus areas, further research into the literature may help define specific areas of Academic Quality.

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