



**Rochester**  
COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL  
**College**



*Online Degree Programs*

## REQUEST FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

*Respectfully Submitted to*

*The Minnesota Online  
Peer Review Evaluation Team*

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## Executive Summary

Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) is seeking authority from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), through the designated grantor MnOnline, to offer degree programs through distance delivery methods. These online degree programs would not replace traditional programs. Rather, the online programs would allow RCTC to expand so that programs are not restricted by time or space. Several exciting transformations would occur as a result.

The first transformation is that by offering online degree programs, RCTC would increase its student base because students would enroll in distance programs with specific educational outcomes in mind and because programs would reach wider audiences. Students would also have more options, such as online programs and an online A.A. degree.

Campus culture would also change because faculty and staff will share their expertise in new ways and because students from many places will share ideas.

Offering online degrees would transform the RCTC mission as well. For example, such programs would allow RCTC to reach new student populations with its mission as a “gateway to world class learning opportunities.”

For the current transformation, RCTC ongoing planning efforts have incorporated online degrees and programs. These plans have been checked through a needs analysis comparing the RCTC online environment to the regional and national college online environments. In order to ensure successful change, the entire institution has been involved in the planning.

Transformation, however, must be based on data. This accreditation process was therefore approached with careful consideration and viewed as a serious endeavor requiring reputable data to support it. The primary needs analysis was done using data showing the growth of online education in the local RCTC online environment, the regional MNSCU online environment, and the national college online environment.

Transformation also needs to be assessed. By examining the challenges identified by the Commission, RCTC has developed a comprehensive response designed to create a culture of assessment and ongoing improvement.



Finally transformation needs to be supported. RCTC has faculty and administrative support to implement online degrees and programs. It also has the available resources and financial capabilities to do so. It also has a timeline in place to make the change happen. Credentialed faculty are involved in each step of the change process.

In conclusion, RCTC is excited about the transformations that can occur by offering online degrees and programs. Such an accreditation will benefit for our community, our faculty and staff, and—most important—our students.



## Overview

Rochester Community and Technical College is the state's oldest and one of the nation's oldest community colleges. It was established after Dr. Charles H. Mayo presented a motion to the Rochester School Board in 1915 to establish its University Department.

The last 50 years of Rochester Community and Technical College have seen steady growth in enrollment and its campus. Today, three miles east from the original downtown location, RCTC hosts 6,000 students on a 518-acre campus served by 500 faculty and staff. The College has granted 27,000 degrees and its surveys indicate that 65 percent of the households within a 30-mile radius of the campus have a family member or spouse who has attended RCTC.

The College enrolls over 7,500 students in credit classes and also serves thousands of others through non-credit classes. The faculty consists of more than 100 highly trained, permanent employees. The College is part of the University Center Rochester, which also includes University of Minnesota- Rochester Center and Winona State University — Rochester Center. This unique partnership brings together a spectrum of program offerings that range from six-month certificate programs to doctoral degree programs in a setting that features state-of-the-art facilities.

Rochester Community and Technical College students can choose from technical programs in such areas as accounting, business, administrative support, allied health, human services, and trade/industry. Students wishing to finish a four-year degree can take their first two years at Rochester Community and Technical College —earning an associate degree—and then transfer to finish a bachelor's degree. The College has teamed up with Winona State University and the University of Minnesota to establish number of “2 plus 2” programs that allows students to complete a four-year degree without leaving Rochester.

In addition to its educational programming, RCTC offers a comprehensive student life program. These opportunities include social activities, speakers, varsity athletics, intramural sports, honor societies and music, to name a few. The new UCR Regional Sports Center boasts a 1,200 square foot facility to accommodate 10 collegiate athletic teams for both men and women. Included are an indoor Field House with a 200 meter track and four multipurpose floor courts, performance court area with seating for up to 1,500, a Kinesiology Lab, Multipurpose Rooms/Classrooms, an Atrium for academic and community gatherings and Athletic Fields.



## 1. What change is being proposed?

RCTC proposes offering online degree programs in order to meet student needs, to expand educational programs and to continue to fulfill its educational mission. As a result, the overall student base will increase and campus culture will be transformed.

### ***1.a. State the specific change that is proposed.***

Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) is seeking authority from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), through the designated grantor MnOnline, to offer degree programs through distance delivery methods. The institution does not plan to supplant traditional on-campus delivery of educational offerings, instead, the goal is to expand the non-traditional offerings that are neither time or space dependent. RCTC would like to offer degree programs through distance delivery methods in addition to its regular offerings in order to accomplish the following goals:

- Meet student needs
- Implement online degrees and programs
- Fulfill the RCTC mission

### **Meeting student needs**

RCTC has an extensive history of meeting the needs of students who are unable to attend classes on-site or during traditional hours (due to work, family, location or other factors) through the use of technology such as Interactive Television (ITV), telecourses, satellite and local television, hybrid and the online or web-delivered environment. The number of courses and programs delivered this way has grown steadily over the past decade, and institutional strategic plans include an increased focus on accessibility for non-traditional learners.

### **Implementing online degrees and programs**

As of spring 2005, RCTC was rated the third highest in the delivery of online credits generated within MnSCU. There were a total of 4,569 credits which include more than 50 individual course sections and approximately 1,500 students. There is nothing to suggest a slowing or decreased interest in this area, as shown by the 31% growth in 2005 to 2006 online FYE (from 307 to 403) compared to 1% overall FYE (4,383 to 4,410). Beyond the myriad of individual courses, there are also several certificates (Coding Specialist, Digital Arts/Computer Graphics, Healthcare Informatics, and Medical Transcription); an Associate of Applied Science in Healthcare Information Technology; and an Associate of Science in Web Design and Development. The institutional change would allow RCTC to meet an immediate strategic



goal with the addition of an online Associated of Arts (A.A.) degree, as well as future programmatic needs.

The historical foundations of online delivery of courses at RCTC were largely the result of innovative faculty seeking new ways to increase enrollments in specific courses. As a result, many individual classes were added to the catalog of online offerings without the development of a college-wide strategy. Over time, the institution has been able to identify the needs of online learners, and has undergone several individual accreditation processes for online degrees and programs.

## **Fulfilling the RCTC Mission**

The college committed to increased accessibility to education as a part of the overall strategic mission, and is currently positioned to focus resources at the program level rather than at the course level. Since there is no distinction in the approval process for campus-based versus online classes or programs, the same strict quality standards and guidelines will apply. Therefore, it is imperative to have the ability to offer online classes that fulfill larger programmatic needs (certificates, diplomas, and degrees) as well as to satisfy online learner's requests for more robust offerings outside the traditional campus modes. Approval of this request will help Rochester Community and Technical College fulfill its educational mission.

### ***1.b. State the expected outcomes of this proposed change - (for example, enrollment growth, enhanced services, financial growth).***

RCTC expects the following outcomes from offering degree programs through distance delivery methods:

- An increase in the overall student base because students will be able to enroll in distance programs with specific educational outcomes in mind
- An opportunity to better serve the needs of our student population, especially working professionals and young families.
- Increased enrollment because the programs can reach wider student audiences.
- A change in campus culture due to faculty sharing their expertise in new ways and due to students from many places sharing ideas.

## **Increasing the overall student base**

The primary outcome of this change will be increased enrollment in the overall student base. This includes traditional students as well as working professionals, adults with family responsibilities, returning older students, and those not physically able to come to the campus. Currently, students are able



to earn credit for many classes and even complete limited programs online however, those interested in earning liberal arts or a transfer degree are required to do so elsewhere. The ability to complete an entire degree at a single institution is a desirable one, and should result in increased online enrollment. As shown in the following charts, RCTC has enjoyed increased overall enrollment at a record pace for the past several years and there has been no negative impact with the growth of online offerings. The overall FYE (Full Year Equivalent) for online courses has more than doubled in three years, while the percent of overall FYE's has grown from 3.9% to 9.0%. Therefore, expansion in the online environment does not appear to come at the expense of campus-based delivery, and previously underserved students are taking advantage of increased learning opportunities. A large number of students are both online and campus-based, meaning this delivery method has primarily been used for scheduling convenience or when campus course sections fill. But with complete degrees online, it is more likely that students will enroll in online with a specific educational outcome in mind.

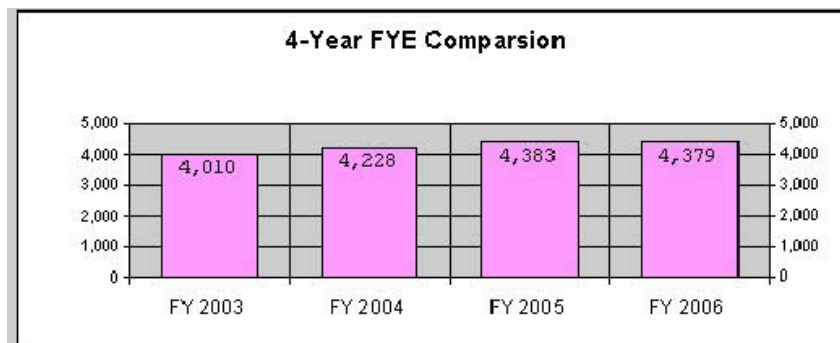


Figure 1: Comparison of RCTC FYE (Full Year Equivalent) 2003-2006

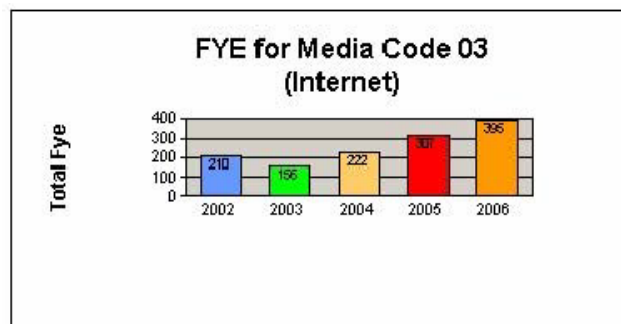


Figure 2: Comparison of RCTC online FYE 2002-2006



**Comparison by FYE and Percent of Total FYE**

Media Code	Short Desc	2002		2003		2004		2005		2006	
		Fye	Pct	Fye	Pct	Fye	Pct	Fye	Pct	Fye	Pct
*	Classroom	3,535	94.4%	3,851	96.0%	4,003	94.6%	4,061	92.7%	3,983	90.9%
02	CD Rom		0.0%		0.0%						
03	Internet	210	5.6%	156	3.9%	222	5.2%	307	7.0%	395	9.0%
04	ITV Sending			1	0.0%	4	0.1%	4	0.1%		
06	Indepen ST		0.0%	3	0.1%		0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
08	ITV Receivng							1	0.0%	1	0.0%
09	Web Enhanced							10	0.2%		
<b>Total</b>		<b>3,744</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>4,011</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>4,230</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>4,383</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>4,379</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Figure 3: RCTC Growth of online FYE's as percentage of total FYE**

### Serving the needs of students

Another effect of the institutional change will be the ability to better serve the needs of specific populations. Rochester is home to both the Mayo Clinic and IBM, whose professional employees have unique higher educational needs. In the past, they have accessed educational offerings primarily in alternative formats such as evening courses, weekends and via other technological means such as ITV. The ability to complete coursework on a more flexible schedule, with asynchronous activities designed around their commitments, is critical.

Many of these employees are returning students looking for career changes or advancements, and the college has had to adapt to their requirements. RCTC has seen dramatic growth in recent years with the older, returning students as lifelong learners. This is not expected to decrease in the near future, and national trends indicate there may be even more dramatic increases. Most of these individuals have access to a personal computer, either at home or in the workplace, and prefer to learn in this environment and have already had the traditional college experience. In addition, southeastern Minnesota has many rural towns with business locations requiring their employees to be present during the work week. This population will be able to access world-class offerings from RCTC without sacrificing their careers. Finally, younger families with small children are not likely to afford either daycare or time away to complete coursework. The opportunity to be at home while working on their educational pursuits is in line with the college's overall mission to provide opportunity and access.

### Expanding educational programs

It is also expected that the ability to offer online programs and degrees will allow some programs to survive and grow with expanded audiences. This has occurred in the past with programs such as Medical



Transcription - enrollments had dropped to perilous levels, and the department faculty was challenged to seek out new ways of delivering the content. One of those ways was through online offerings, which enabled professionals and out-of-state students to access the courses. Not only did enrollments increase, and stabilize the overall department, but new certificate programs were designed specifically for this group of learners.

Similar results were noted in the area of Digital Arts. The challenge in this case was not decreased enrollment, but limited computer labs. In order to meet the increased demand for more classes, Digital Arts offered many courses in the online environment. Using advanced technology to simulate the computer lab setting on home systems, the department has seen this student base grow dramatically. Not only did this solution alleviate the strain of campus computer labs, it led directly to development of a certificate in Computer Graphics and A.S. in Web Design and Development. The Digital Arts department continues to seek innovative ways to teach this unique, creative set of students, and has received praise for outstanding performance. It is expected that as other programs see fluctuations in enrollments, alternative deliveries such as online may offer more stability and relief.

### **Changing the campus culture**

Probably the most important impact as a result of this change will be in the overall campus culture. Increased enrollments are essential in providing more opportunities for instructors, students and staff. As projection goals are met, success is shared by the entire campus. Students are able to plan their educational careers without as much concern about cancelled classes or suspended programs, and develop their schedules accordingly. Faculty have found online class development not only challenging, but an invigorating new way of sharing knowledge. The domino effect has in turn affected web-enhanced and traditional courses, and increased the importance of considering the relationship of education and technology. Many departments are proposing new programs and courses based on expanding audiences, and this is viewed with enthusiasm. Individuals with technical backgrounds are being hired to support these needs, provide training, and serve students leading to a growing employee base.

As online courses reach previously untapped audiences, the exposure to diverse students from a variety of backgrounds and locations has broadened our cultural awareness. The experience of multicultural students interacting with each other is invaluable, and has led to a thriving academic environment. Online services have been developed to mirror the campus-based ones, and are being utilized by both online and campus-based students. Finally, the college is viewed as a technological leader and world-class education



provider. No longer subject to physical boundaries, RCTC's reputation for quality can be experienced worldwide by a new generation of online students.

***1.c. Project the impact of this proposed change on the organization's current mission, the numbers and types of students to be served, and the breadth of educational offerings.***

Offering degree programs through distance delivery methods will affect the mission, student body, and educational offerings in the following ways:

- Online degree programs will allow RCTC to reach new student populations with its mission as a “gateway to world class learning opportunities.”
- The student body will increase.
- Educational offerings will have the added option of the new online A.A. degree.

**Expanding the RCTC mission**

Rochester Community and Technical College's stated mission (Appendix A) is to “provide accessible, affordable, quality learning opportunities to serve a diverse and growing community.” The stated vision is that RCTC “will be a universal gateway to world class learning opportunities.” The college has traditionally served the higher education needs of the citizens of Southeastern Minnesota, but many current programs serve national and even international students. This is reflected throughout the Statement of Philosophy in the following:

- Quality educational opportunities must be affordable, convenient, and geographically accessible for all students;
- Open educational access requires the use of a variety of instructional strategies and technologies to accommodate individual learner needs and varied learning styles;
- Quality and excellence occur in a continuous improvement climate that recognizes emerging technologies, values applied experiences, advances community and business partnerships, and promotes student and staff development.

The Strategic Plan reflects this vision as well. Goal #2 for the college is to “Enhance learning through improved instruction, support services, technology and facilities.” This is supported through Teaching and Learning Strategic plans such as:



- Strategy 1.1.A.1.2 - Support all accreditation efforts undertaken by Teaching and Learning programs.
- Strategy 2.1.A.4.2 - Broaden activities in distance education.
- Goal 2.4.A.7 Align Facility and Technology to All Academic Plans

The decision to seek the accreditation to offer online programs is consistent with our mission and strategic priorities, and will support efforts outlined in the statements above.

### **Increasing enrollment**

Based on the statistics provided in section 1.c., RCTC can reasonably predict future enrollments in the online environment. The expected overall FYE for 2007 is approximately 4,400 students, and Media Code 3 courses (online) should grow to roughly 484, or 11% of the total. There should be close to 2,000 students enrolled in online class sections throughout the academic year, and approximately 75 individual course sections available per semester. (There may be a spike in online enrollment the first year the A.A. degree becomes available, but it is expected to level off thereafter). RCTC has consistently been in the top five educational providers in the MnSCU system for online credits generated, and the institutional change is not expected to affect that status. As mentioned in the Statement of Philosophy, RCTC as a universal gateway to world class learning opportunities will be supported with these efforts. We will be able to provide educational opportunity regardless of geographic location or schedule.

### **Adding the new online A.A. degree**

One of the first actions taken upon approval of this institutional change will be the completion of the online Associate of Arts (A.A) degree. The college has already identified the three remaining courses needed in order to fulfill the requirements, and plans to offer the online AA option in fall 2006. Another program seeking online delivery is the Administrative Assistant Program. Students can currently earn an A.S., A.A.S, Certificate or Diploma on campus. A written proposal has been approved internally, and the timeline is for this online program to be offered starting summer 2006. The college is currently undertaking a study to determine what courses and programs are most needed after the aforementioned are in place. Student services personnel involved with advising online students will collect data, as well as from satisfaction surveys from Noel-Levitz and others will be used to begin the planning process. As in the past, faculty will be proposing course and program conversions based on enrollment numbers and needs. Administration will also contact the appropriate departments and faculty leaders to encourage growth in targeted areas. This process will be an ongoing one, where growth is strategically planned and managed. The same strict approval processes will be used to ensure quality and learner outcomes,



resulting in more coordinated and logical online opportunities. These actions will increase the breadth of educational offerings at RCTC, and allow more students access through a variety of deliveries.

***1.d. Identify the Commission's policy relevant to this change.***

The Commission's policy relevant to this change is I.C.2.b.4, Changes in Educational Offerings, "Degree programs offered through distance delivery methods."

