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Educational Quality

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A Growing Focus on Student Success

For much of the 20th century, the quality of colleges and universities was measured by reputation, size, resources, and the academic qualifications of entering students. But by the mid 80's, as costs grew, so did closer scrutiny of the effectiveness of the educational enterprise. Notably, with the Department of Education's publishing of A Nation at Risk in 1983, policy-makers began a steadily

increasing emphasis on accountability, outputs, and outcomes. The public, already worried about rising education costs, fell right in step.

Thus an assessment movement focused on educational quality took shape. Across the country, colleges and states participated with varying levels of enthusiasm. But in 1990, the federal government began to insist that their deputized accreditation agencies stress student learning

assessment. These regional accreditors played a key role in institutionalizing outcome assessment. As mounting evidence suggests, accountability demands will continue to increase, strengthening a movement that is still in its early stages. [For more information about accreditation, see p. 3 of this issue and also Vol. 1, Issue 15, published August 2009, which is dedicated to the topic of accreditation.]

A Key Board Role – Monitoring Educational Quality

How does a college board's role relate to the growing interest in educational outcomes? In Making the Grade, Peter Ewell builds the case that **boards of trustees should monitor educational performance as intently as they monitor financial performance.**

The board's role is the strategic one of ensuring the institution attends to its mission

and makes needed improvements. [Note: DCCCD's mission is to equip students for successful living and responsible citizenship in a rapidly changing world.]

Success, Ewell stresses, depends on building a culture of evidence based on reliable, standardized data that are routinely used and benchmarked.

In particular, he recommends the board

shine a spotlight on five key areas: 1) student learning outcomes; 2) retention, graduation and student "flow"; 3) stakeholder input; 4) program assets; and 5) accreditation.

Each of these areas is discussed in this newsletter; see pp. 2-3.



ATD

Conceived in 2004 by Lumina Foundation and six national partner organizations, **Achieving the Dream** has expanded to more than 100 institutions in 22 states, reaching nearly one million students.

ATD is focused on creating a **culture of evidence** on community college campuses in which data collection and analysis drive efforts to identify problems that prevent students from succeeding – particularly low-income students and students of color – and develop programs to help them stay in school and receive a certificate or diploma.

Four DCCCD colleges are participating in ATD: Brookhaven, El Centro, North Lake, and Richland.

ATD requires participation by college trustees.

Trustee Kitty Boyle represented DCCCD at the annual ATD Board Retreat in 2010. Chairman Jerry Prater and Vice Chair Charletta Rogers Compton will represent DCCCD at the retreat in March 2011.

Assessing Student Learning

Basically, the assessment of student learning involves analyzing aggregate data to understand broad categories of student performance and to reinforce the need for improvement.

Through such data the college draws general conclusions about the quality of teaching and learning in the institution.

Boards of trustees can influence this process. They can insist that learning outcomes are spelled out and consistent with the college's stated mission and that, based on these outcomes, graduates and program completers perform satisfactorily. They can determine that data is specific, useful, and benchmarked against external indicators.

Most importantly, boards of trustees can insist that what is learned from the data leads to improved performance.

Student Success – Retention, Graduation and Flow

“Student success” is shorthand for keeping students advancing toward their educational goals. It is the complex process of attending to the needs and interests of a diverse student body who may be ill-prepared upon arrival and who need to make substantive progress while in college.

To assess student success, boards of trustees begin by monitoring retention and graduation rates. But since success looks different for different student groups, especially in community colleges, boards should also expect to see additional measures that reflect this complex reality.

With key success indicators in place, it is appropriate for boards of trustees to hold leadership accountable for improvement in student success.

Listening to Stakeholders

Since students can provide clear perspectives on the services they receive and the learning environment they experience, it is important to get their feedback. Institutional research offices generally undertake a few central survey comparisons and compare results to peer institutions. Two national surveys widely used by

community colleges are the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, pronounced sessy) and the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory.

Other stakeholders, such as employers and universities receiving transfer students, are generally more responsive in focus

groups or interview settings.

When receiving data, boards of trustees should look for patterns and raise questions to determine strategic interests and issues.

DCCCD colleges participate in CCSSE and Noel-Levitz surveys.

Taking Stock of Program Assets

Program review looks at educational product – matching programs with institutional mission and priorities, maintaining the needed program mix, identifying exemplary programs, managing program costs, and assuring a viable core of general education.

Program review also takes

a look at the viability of current programs as well as future program needs. **Data provided to boards of trustees should give them a “big picture” understanding of the components of program review, including strengths and weaknesses of the programs.**

At the policy level, the responsibility of boards is to assure this review leads to improvements that are incorporated in institutional planning and decision-making.

DCCCD’s board policy concerning viability is:

To ensure that public funds are put to their highest and best use in

pursuit of the College District’s purposes and goals, the Board’s policy is to discontinue educational programs that are under-performing based on the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s evaluation criteria (adopted April 2008).

Using Accreditation to Evaluate Educational Quality

Institutional accreditation occurs in 10-year cycles under the auspices of a regional accrediting agency. Comparable to a financial audit, the process assesses how the academic side of the college is functioning and, with a successful result, ensures academic quality and integrity. At its conclusion, a confidential action letter, similar to the financial audit’s management letter, raises any concerns and commends good work.

Similarly, in program accreditation a professional association evaluates a particular field of study, generally in a 3- to 5-year cycle. Examples of program accreditations in DCCCD include interior design, veterinary technology, allied health and nursing programs.

Since institutional accreditation focuses on

quality, requires major organizational effort, and is necessary to remain in good academic standing, it helps boards of trustees assess educational performance, note improvements or issues that have developed since the last review, and assure review efforts mesh well with on-going student learning and success initiatives.

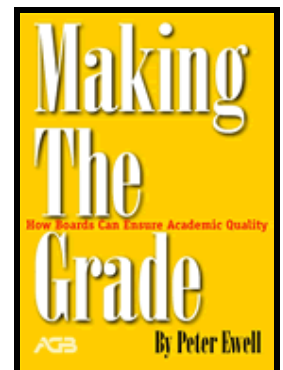
For DCCCD, institutional accreditation is accorded by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), Commission on Colleges. DCCCD is one of two multi-college districts in Texas wherein each college is separately accredited. (The other is the Alamo district in San Antonio.)

The decision for separate college accreditation, rather than single district accreditation, was formative in shaping DCCCD’s subsequent organizational structure and behavior.

Separate accreditation requires each college to document a measure of independence and control that would not be required or expected in a single district accreditation.

Proponents of separate accreditation point out the benefits of causing each college staff to examine and regulate itself in conformance with SACS standards.

Arguments against separate accreditation include duplicated costs and the unevenness of evaluations from SACS visitation teams. DCCCD trustees will remember the unevenness of expectations applied to colleges during the 2000-03 accreditation cycle, resulting in criticisms of two colleges for over-reliance on adjunct faculty.



Peter T. Ewell is vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) and is widely regarded as a national expert on improving colleges and universities through the assessment of educational outcomes.

Unique Challenges with Community Colleges

Community colleges present unique challenges in the assessment of educational performance. Their mission does not fit typical university measures such as academic rankings of entering students, size of endowment, quality of research, and nationally recognized programs.

The single best predictor of graduation, for example, is the academic skills of the

entering student, a clear advantage for colleges with selective admissions and elite reputations.

There is nothing elite about the open door mission. Rather, it is grounded in accepting and working with the great variety of students that present themselves, many of whom are weak in basic skills or are the first in their family to attend college.

As community-based institutions, community colleges are responsible for a broad and complex mission that cannot be assessed with simple measures.

“Our goal is to help the nation double the number of low-income adults who earn postsecondary degrees or credentials by age 26.”

*The Bill & Melinda Gates
Foundation
2009*

Understanding the Comprehensive Mission

In the community college world, the term “comprehensive mission” refers to the multiple educational undertakings that, when present, define the institution as comprehensive. They include transfer education, career and technical education (CTE), developmental education, continuing education including workforce development and community services, and student services.

Transfer and CTE have been part of the story from the beginning. All the other mission elements have evolved steadily, if unevenly, over much of the 20th and now 21st centuries and are in direct response to societal needs.

All have grown in complexity.

Transfer – credit programs that offer the first two years of a baccalaureate degree, including a general education core and early coursework in a chosen major.

Career and technical education – career preparation in one of a broad array of associate degree or credit certificate programs.

Developmental – remedial study designed to prepare students lacking in college-level skills, primarily to be successful in transfer or CTE programs.

Continuing education / workforce development / community service – a diverse array of non-credit programs designed to prepare and/or maintain career knowledge and

skills, appeal to leisure interests, or meet community needs.

Student services – counseling, advising, financial aid, library services, etc., as well as scores of co-curricular activities that support and enrich the learning environment.

Core, Vertical, and Horizontal Missions

Thomas Bailey and Vanessa Morest of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University offer an interesting way to visualize how the missions relate to one another and function in the real world. The core includes the transfer, career and technical education, and developmental functions. Developmental studies is included in the core because, generally speaking, it prepares students to enter the other two credit programs.

The core extends vertically to strengthen the

educational ladder, from public schools below to universities above. Vertical activity tends to focus on traditional age college students, conform to state requirements, and rely on traditional funding sources.

Horizontal expansion from the core reaches into the community to meet needs that are the mission purview of continuing education and community service. Horizontal activity tends to focus on non-traditional students, carry fewer state requirements and less state funding, and attract

more discretionary funds from the local community.

Student services programs undergird all these efforts.

Later issues of *Board Briefs* newsletters treat each component of the comprehensive mission in greater detail.

Debates For and Against Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness is espoused by most practitioners who see the extension of vertical and horizontal missions beyond the core as part of their overall mission.

“Comprehensiveness” increases friends and supporters and expands discretionary resources. It encourages openness to innovation and change.

At essence, advocates see the comprehensive mission as providing more options for the college, its students, and community.

The case against comprehensiveness

fundamentally concerns the risks associated with being overextended.

Critics believe the community college has taken on too much in its efforts to respond to student and community needs. It cannot be all things to all people, they maintain, or it will spread itself too thin.

Until recently, this camp generally favored emphasizing one or both of the two original core functions – transfer and career and technical education. However, as universities have gained

experience working with students who lack basic skills, they have begun turning to community colleges to “handle” the developmental function as part of their mission.

VFA

The Voluntary Framework of Accountability is the first national system of accountability specifically for and by community colleges.

The VFA is structured as a three-phase initiative and is currently in Phase II, which will end in Fall 2011 with the completion of:

#1 a technical manual to define and instruct calculation of measures,

#2 a framework for guiding colleges in the assessment of student learning outcomes,

#3 a blueprint and mock-up of a data collection and display tool,

#4 the preliminary results of pilot testing, and

#5 a strategic plan for college participation and engagement in the VFA.

Phase III – the availability of the VFA to all community colleges – is anticipated to start in 2012.

DCCCD is one of 40 college districts participating in Phase II. Chancellor Wright Lassiter is a member of the national steering committee.

VFA is funded by Lumina Foundation for Education, Inc. and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

DCCCD Board Gives Guarantees to Students

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In 1991, DCCCD's Board of Trustees gave these guarantees to students (Board Policy EGD LOCAL):

The District guarantees to its Associate in Arts and its Associate In Sciences graduates and other students who have completed a formal transfer plan the transferability of course credits to cooperating Texas colleges and universities.

If such courses are rejected by a college or university, a student may take tuition-free alternate

courses at a District college that are acceptable to the university.

The District guarantees the job competencies of its graduates.

If an Associate of Applied Science degree or certificate graduate is judged by the graduate's employer to be lacking in technical job skills identified as exit competencies for the graduate's specific degree or certificate program, the graduate will be provided up to nine tuition-free hours of

additional skill training by a District college.

About Our Organization...

The mission of DCCCD is to equip students for successful living and responsible citizenship in a rapidly changing local, national and world community. Educational opportunities are offered without regard to race, color, age, national origin, religion, sex, disability, sexual orientation or genetic information. Equal educational opportunity includes admission, recruitment, extra-curricular programs and activities, access to course offerings, counseling and testing, financial aid, employment, health and insurance services, and athletics.

Takeaways from this Issue Across

Across

1. The U.S. Department of Education published A___at Risk in 1983.
4. Peter Ewell makes the case that boards of trustees should monitor educational performance as closely as they monitor___performance.
8. Community colleges enroll almost___of all U.S. undergraduate students.
9. As universities have gained experience working with students who lack basic skill, they have begun turning to community colleges to "handle" the___function.
10. Currently fewer than half of ___college students meet their goals.

Down

2. Institutional accreditation occurs in___-year cycles.
3. The single best predictor of___is the academic skills of the entering student.
5. Boards of trustees can insist that learning outcomes are___out and consistent with the college's state mission.
6. Program review takes a look at the___of current programs as well as future program needs.
7. "Student success" is shorthand for keeping students advancing up the educational___.

