

Learning Outcomes Navigation through Faculty and Administration Collaboration

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Introduction

Colorado Mountain College is comprised of seven campuses and five learning centers scattered over 12,500 square miles of the Rocky Mountains. Three of the campuses are residential, and the remaining four are commuter campuses situated in resorts catering to transient workers, second home owners, and traditional college students. Educational offerings include AA, AS, AGS, AAS degrees and occupational certificates. The challenges are both geographic and curricular, as each learning center has different community and student needs.

The college has struggled with a college-wide unification of course offerings, programs, certificates, and degrees. With close to 80% of our faculty teaching part time, maintaining instructional consistency throughout the curriculum is an ongoing challenge. We have a strong core of full-time faculty (both in the Arts and Sciences and Career and Technical Education) who coordinate the curriculum on each campus, but maintaining that level of coordination throughout the entire district is difficult. Therefore, in order to ensure more instructional consistency and coordination, Colorado Mountain College set out two years ago to review and assess learning outcomes for all of the courses on our master course list. This paper will detail the process, highlighting not only the successes but also the failures.

Charting a Course

In order to navigate through the challenges presented above, the college needed an assessment plan, one that would generate enthusiasm from both administrators and faculty. Everyone agreed on our primary goals, but not everyone agreed on how to accomplish them. One thing we knew for sure: we did not want to get bogged down in endless committee meetings. So, instead of delaying the project to reach consensus, we forged ahead, arranging a series of short-term goals to jumpstart the course-level assessment process. To promote collaboration, the administration brought faculty together from all twelve of our learning centers instead of having each center work on courses in isolation. Although we got off to a quick and successful beginning, one of the first lessons we learned was that a long-range institutional strategy should govern our series of short-range projects.

Setting Sail

In 2005, immediately prior to embarking on our assessment project, Colorado Mountain College created new Discipline Coordinator positions in Speech, English, Math, and Biology (our largest general education disciplines). Initially, the position's responsibilities included organizing meetings, creating web resources, reviewing and recommending courses, mentoring faculty, and developing better pedagogical methods. However, after communicating with faculty across the district, it became apparent that the Discipline Coordinator's most important duty should be to develop and maintain consistency in course objectives and course delivery. Thus, the focus of the position shifted from general instructional issues to assessment, especially after our English Discipline Coordinator visited Moraine Valley Community College and participated in the Learning Summit in Chicago. She brought back the *Learning Exchange Network* (LENS) material on assessment and strongly recommended that the English and Speech faculty convene college wide in order to focus on course-level assessment. Our first goal was to define our assessment terms, not only for English and Speech but also for the entire college. Using the LENS material as a guide, we created the following definitions:

- *Learning Outcomes – essential knowledge or behavior that a student must have at the conclusion of a course, usually demonstrated and evaluated at the conclusion of the course*
- *Competency – specific ability or set of skills a student must have in order to meet criteria that lead to a demonstration of the student’s achievement of the learning outcome.*
- *Skill – a tool or set of tools that a student must have to demonstrate the competency and that can be practiced or achieved in subunits of a course.*
- *Objective – the goal the instructor has to help a student reach a learning outcome or its associative competencies and skills.*

Ports of Call

Another important decision was to send a number of faculty and administrators to Learning Summits hosted by the *League for Innovation*. At these conferences (Chicago in 2005 and St. Louis in 2006), we gathered information to determine our direction for approaching the learning outcomes process college wide. Other helpful conferences we visited were held at Valencia Community College (Florida), Moraine Valley Community College (Illinois), Community College of Aurora (Colorado), and the Higher Learning Commission’s Assessment Conference in Chicago. Sending teams of faculty and administrators to conferences was an expensive but worthwhile step for us. Although we had researched what other colleges were doing in terms of assessment, delving into their plans to glean best practices was a hit-or-miss endeavor. At every opportunity, we consulted with colleagues from peer institutions, often meeting in small groups to discuss what had worked and not worked for them.

Full-Speed Ahead

Soon, not only were the English and Speech faculty creating new course learning outcomes, but also the Math, Chemistry, and Developmental Education faculty. The assessment project gained momentum and excitement from college-wide faculty and administrative participation. In addition to writing course learning outcomes, the faculty created multiple assessments and assessment rubrics for their courses; naturally, during these meetings, they shared best practices, mentored adjunct faculty, and discussed new developments in their disciplines. The work was collaborative, focused on achieving student success and improving instructional delivery. The project was never intended to be used to evaluate, reward, or punish faculty or to inhibit academic freedom.

All Hands on Deck

AQIP Strategy Forum, Chicago

This event brought a small group of senior administrators and faculty together to plan our AQIP strategy. Several of our most productive sessions concerned assessment, and we came away from the Strategy Forum with a much clearer vision of our Assessment Project. During this time two key players (one administrator and one faculty member) declined to continue in their roles as assessment leaders. Their departures occasioned the reorganization of our informal assessment team into a more formal Assessment Committee, comprised of twelve senior administrators and faculty members. Now, instead of depending upon the hard work and expertise of a few colleagues to lead the Assessment Project, the Assessment Committee began to delegate responsibility throughout the college, bringing in Campus Deans, Instructional Supervisors, Discipline Coordinators, and Senior Faculty to form a broad-based, collaborative effort.

Assessment Committee Meetings

From the beginning, the members of the Assessment Committee stressed action over talk. In years past, other instructional committees had researched, debated, and planned college-wide assessment projects, but for a variety of reasons those committees, after achieving some notable successes, had lost momentum along the way. How would we combat this problem? Well, since our Pilot Project (course-level assessments in English, Speech, Math, and Chemistry) had returned such promising results, we decided to move forward by conducting a course-level assessment of our entire curriculum. "This will take years and years," was the most common reaction -- yet our President and Chief Learning Officer expected the project to be accomplished in three semesters.

The Committee quickly identified our top 100 courses (based on enrollment) from the master course list and sent out letters to qualified faculty, asking if they would volunteer to lead assessment efforts in their field of expertise. Then we waited for a response. There was a conscious decision to not require faculty to be a part of the assessment process. The Committee felt very strongly that faculty members who volunteered would bring much more enthusiasm and vitality to the project than those who were assigned duties. We were very pleased by the number of positive responses, and to this date we have not assigned a role to anyone. How did we attract faculty buy-in for such a time-consuming project? Most were eager to participate, but they were worried the project might interfere with their teaching responsibilities. In order to solve this problem, our Campus Deans and Instructional Supervisors worked with faculty to adjust their teaching schedules, in many cases providing reassignment time and hiring adjunct faculty when needed. For summer work, when most of our full-time faculty are off-contract, our President provided generous stipends.

Faculty In-Services and Assessment Workshops

Twice a year, faculty members from our twelve sites convene for a college-wide in-service. These all-day meetings are our best opportunities to discuss issues that affect the entire college. This past year we focused our energies on the Assessment Project, meeting in the morning to discuss college-wide assessment issues, then meeting in the afternoon to focus on course-level assessment. With careful planning, we managed to make the most of these two days, as each discipline (led by a Discipline Coordinator) completed a number of specific assessment tasks. In addition to college-wide in-services, each campus holds all-day faculty meetings in August and January. Our instructional supervisors and senior faculty have led assessment workshops during these meetings as well.

In order to provide our faculty with ongoing assessment training, we have held two college-wide workshops in addition to the semi-annual in-services. These are expensive meetings, as they involve travel and lodging, but they are vital in terms of maintaining momentum for the Assessment Project. Through trial and error, we have found that the more often we meet as a group, the more likely we are to follow through with individual tasks. After a year and a half of in-services, workshops, and trainings, more Assessment Leaders have emerged, ensuring college-wide consistency in methodology. Our goals are to (1) create the best assessment process for Colorado Mountain College, (2) train our administrators and faculty in that process, and (3) maintain an efficient, productive, and comprehensive assessment cycle.

Master and Commander

The Colorado Commission on Higher Education

"To help eliminate the guesswork of transferring general education course credits, Colorado has developed a statewide guaranteed transfer program (gtPATHWAYS) and a statewide transfer policy. gtPATHWAYS applies to all Colorado public institutions of higher education, and there are more than 500 lower-division general education courses in 20 subject areas approved for guaranteed transfer" (CCHE 2007). Although Colorado has established course descriptions, objectives, and outlines for each of the 500 guaranteed transfer courses, these are general course guidelines, not comprehensive learning outcomes statements. However, alignment (not only within the state of Colorado but also within our institution) is a crucial element of our assessment project, and as the

faculty of Colorado Mountain College began drafting course-level learning outcomes, competencies, and skills, they made sure to align them with state, institutional, program, and course learning objectives.

The Higher Learning Commission

The overarching collaborative piece in our assessment project has been our participation at Higher Learning Commission conferences, Colorado Commission on Higher Education conferences, and Learning College summits. The crucial element here is that we continue to send board members, administrators, and faculty members to these meetings. The more stakeholders who become familiar with the importance of assessment, the more likely it is that we will achieve our purpose: to continually improve instruction at Colorado Mountain College.

Staying the Course

We are confident that we will complete our course-level assessments within the next year, and we are excited about what the assessment process has done for our college. Our next phase will be to establish a structured review cycle as we prepare for an AQIP visit in the summer of 2007.

In closing, we would like to share with you one of the many lessons we have learned over the past two years: remember to celebrate your achievements. Although we enjoyed some successes along the way, we did not always share the good news, and often wondered why no one knew what we were trying to accomplish. Our advice is to make assessment plans not only viable, but visible. Reward your efforts and make the entire institution aware of what you have done and what you are planning to do. This positive reinforcement will foster good will and encourage other colleagues to participate.

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