

**ADVANCEMENT SECTION**

**REPORT OF THE COMPREHENSIVE VISIT**

**to**

**MESA COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

**Mesa, Arizona**

**March 7-9, 2005**

**for**

**The Higher Learning Commission**

**A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools**

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## I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

On the College's website link to the Service Learning Program there are several quotations that flash across the page that seem to accurately characterize the spirit and culture at MCC. One is from the Carnegie Foundation: "A good college affirms that service to others is a central part of education." The second is from the compelling statement of Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Mesa Community College is part of a college district that has long been an example of what community colleges working together can be and do to make a difference for the better in the life of the world. In a recent article in *The Business Journal* in Phoenix, there was an editorial by Chancellor Rufus Glasper entitled "Get Beyond Boundaries to Improve Education." (Oct 8, 2004) Acknowledging that we all live with boundaries—"limits we place upon ourselves or are placed upon us by outside pressures. . . . One of the keys to that achievement is to discount artificial limits and reach beyond the social, cultural, financial, administrative, personal, and even political boundaries that hold back the full potential of any student and the full potential of our community." He referred to the 12 commitments of the Maricopa Community Colleges and acknowledged that each of the ten colleges has its own vision, mission, and goals to which they aspire, even as they share common convictions.

It is clear that Mesa Community College, the largest of the colleges in the Maricopa Community College District, has a responsibility to its community that extends beyond the geographical boundaries of Mesa. In fact, the etymology of the word "mesa" suggests "an isolated, relatively flat-topped natural elevation, usually more extensive than a butte and a little less extensive than a plateau." "Mesa" is also a "table mountain." The origins of the word, which comes from the Latin root for "table"—"mensa," connect it also to the name given to a constellation of stars in the southern hemisphere.

If the college, whose middle name is community, is faithful to the meaning and promise of its name—"table mountain"—it has embodied in its very name, its mission: a place where people gather to be nourished together and by each other in their lives of learning. It is a place set on a hill, named for a constellation of stars that pierce the darkness with light and give us something to reach for.

## II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

In anticipation of the visit of the team to campus, the College identified two areas for consultative advice: distance education and the all-encompassing challenge of managing exponential growth and change in a very complex environment.

**Topic One: Distance Education.** As the College readies itself for going beyond the offering of online courses, expanding to the offering of online degrees, the initial suggestions of the team included the following points shared in the Exit Interview:

1. Developing an implementation plan for the roll-out of coherent distance education programs and degrees that identifies which programs will be developed first—including the rationale for choice based on the needs to be served.
2. Determining whether quality guidelines for courses should be college-wide or departmental in nature.
3. Identifying and developing those student services that are necessary to support the delivery of programs.
4. Identifying and recommending solutions for some of the academic considerations associated with online delivery such as consistency in faculty loads, class sizes, and compensation standards.
5. Clarifying and developing a structure in which the Dean responsible for Distance Education and OnLine Degree and Certificate Programs can operate most efficiently and effectively.

The team members also offer the following as consultative advice intended to assist Mesa Community College in advancing the quality of higher learning.

The Higher Learning Commission’s document, Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs, provides the basis for our assessment of the institution’s distance education initiative. The document, adopted by all regional accrediting bodies, is based on five practices “essential to quality education programming”. Each practice is presented with evidence visible during the visit, from documents and interviews with staff, and concludes with specific suggestions for the institution.

**A. *Institutional Context and Commitment***

*Electronically offered programs both support and extend the roles of educational institutions. Increasingly they are integral to academic organization, with growing implications for institutional infrastructure.*

\* The MCC distance education program is consistent with the institution’s mission through “provision of a learning-centered environment that is responsive”. In an interview with the Distance Education Coordinator, we found that the demand for online courses is driven by demand from students and the community at-large and by interest and capacity to respond at the academic department level.

\* A vision and mission are defined for distance education at MCC, as evidenced by the institution’s Best Practices in Distance Learning: A Faculty Guide which can be found on the institution’s web site. The vision, mission and current programming signal a clear commitment to effective distance delivery.

**B. *Curriculum and Instruction***

*Methods change, but standards of quality endure. The important issues are not*

*technical but curriculum-driven and pedagogical. Decisions about such matters are made by qualified professionals and focus on learning outcomes for an increasingly diverse student population.*

- \* Courses offered have already successfully passed through the College's approval process.
- \* Online courses are listed in the College's schedule of courses each semester, clearly making students aware of the availability of this mode of alternative delivery.
- \* The College does not offer a complete online degree or certificate, but plans to do so in the near future.

### **C. Faculty Support**

*Faculty roles are becoming increasingly diverse and reorganized. For example, the same person may not perform both the tasks of course development and direct instruction to students. Regardless of who performs which of these tasks, important issues are involved.*

- \* Faculty are provided training and support for online course delivery through the Center for Teaching and Learning.
- \* The staff includes an Instructional Designer who works with faculty in the development of courses for online delivery.
- \* Courses offered are developed and controlled by each department.
- \* Documents found on the web site support the type of preparation that is available for faculty.

### **D. Student Support**

*Colleges and universities have learned that the twenty-first century student is different, both demographically and geographically, from students of previous generations. These differences affect everything from admissions policy to library services. Reaching these students, and serving them appropriately, are major challenges for today's institutions.*

- \* Support exists for students as evidenced in the pre-course orientation that is available to all students.
- \* No evidence exists beyond pre-course orientation for students who have self-identified as less ready to take online courses.
- \* Students are directed to use the central testing center to take exams in online classes; this creates a large volume of test takers who converge on the testing center.
- \* Students have access to a significant array of online library resources to support online learning.

### **E. Evaluation and Assessment**

*Both the assessment of student achievement and evaluation of the overall program take on added importance as new techniques evolve. For example, in asynchronous programs the element of seat time is essentially removed from the equation. For these reasons, the institution conducts sustained, evidence-based and participatory inquiry as to whether*

*distance learning programs are achieving objectives. The results of such inquiry are used to guide curriculum design and delivery, pedagogy, and educational processes, and may affect future policy and budgets and perhaps have implications for the institution's roles and mission.*

\* There doesn't appear to be any evidence for institutional review of program effectiveness for the current distance education operation of the college.

\* In addition, there appears to be no differential or evaluation of student performance beyond the usual course evaluation (tests, exams, etc).

### **Summary Consultative Advice on Distance Education**

From documents reviewed and interviews and conversations during the on-site visit, it is evident that a great deal thought and effort has already been invested in Mesa Community College's Distance Education program. The College has defined operations that will support continued existence of the program. Because there are still challenges that are present related to effective management of the delivery of degrees at a distance, the team proposes that the College consider the following options before submitting a formal request for change of scope and approval from the Higher Learning Commission:

- Developing a Distance Education Department with experienced leadership in the field, reporting directly to the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and with adequate staff to ensure and evaluate effective teaching and student learning.
- Exploring and implementing a formal growth plan to help steer the College in the direction of managing expansion. The student population is growing at a fast rate but no plans exist for managing this growth in online learning. The challenge here is related to the broader challenge of managing the growth of the College as a whole in response to changing demographics.
- Establishing a Distance Education Advisory Committee to address issues and recommend solutions. This would ensure adequate faculty and administrative involvement college-wide as well as continued responsiveness to those served.
- Planning for a systematic roll-out for the delivery of degrees and certificates to ensure quality in all areas.
- Creating avenues of and methods to assist faculty and students, such as a 24/7 help desk to answer technical questions. The volume of online students in the region suggests the need for extensive technical support for asynchronous learning.
- Developing and implementing procedures for new programs considered for delivered via distance.
- Ensuring that students in the online programs have access to the same opportunities as possible to participate in the rich programs the College offers to its traditional students, such as Service Learning and Study Abroad.
- Addressing administrative issues including such things as faculty load and compensation and class size for online courses.

- Monitoring and improving retention in online courses so that retention in online approaches the current retention in traditional courses.

The College has developed a number of the elements necessary for developing and supporting successful online programs. By considering the options and developing additional responses, as well as investigating and perhaps adopting some of the best practices of other institutions who have demonstrated success in the delivery of on-line degrees, Mesa Community College will be positioned to implement entire online certificate and degree programs in the foreseeable future.

**Topic Two: The Challenge of Managing Growth.** The management of growth at Mesa Community College (and, indeed, in the Maricopa Community College District) is a very complex issue. The team is hardly equipped with definitive answers, but based on our study, review, and conversations both before and during the visit, we will offer some observations and perhaps suggest pieces of a framework that might be useful.

Mesa Community College is in a unique and enviable situation. It has the resources to grow; the demand to expand to meet the needs of a changing and fast-growing population in need of higher education; the strong support of its immediate geographical service area both in enthusiastic praise and nearly unheard of, in this economic day and age, an overwhelming vote to increase their own financial obligations with a bond issue of nearly a billion dollars. The College asked how it might best prepare for stresses on human and financial resources while continuing to ensure the quality of service. How can the College ensure a total academic experience that continues to foster the development of the whole student and fulfill its “ultimate purpose . . . to improve the quality of the community we serve”?

We are aware, and we are certain that Mesa Community College is also aware, that there are a number of corresponding forces that make responding to the challenge of managing growth very difficult. These include the competing needs of the Southern and Dobson Campus, the Red Mountain Campus, and the Downtown Center whose growth and development is so clearly linked with the revitalization and economic and cultural growth of the city the College calls home. There are also the complex relationships with the growing and highly regarded Maricopa Community College District that also serves areas that are changing as rapidly and have needs and demands not unlike those in the burgeoning East Valley Area. There are the inevitable tensions resulting from the reasonable expectations of Mesa Community College as the largest of the ten colleges in a district where large and small alike are sometimes served, sometimes encumbered by the bureaucracy of the district office. And there is the very current and all-encompassing legislation moving through the process as the visiting team was on campus that could change the landscape of higher education and require in some ways a rethinking of the mission of some, if not all, of the community colleges in the state and in the Maricopa District.

We do not offer answers, but rather suggest several guiding principles:

1. Remain mindful of the resources needed to support growth and acknowledge that they are and will be limited.
2. Consider carefully the costs and benefits, as well as the wisdom and viability of duplicating programs and services at a variety of sites. Evaluate whether resources might be more effectively used if unique programs and services were located in one venue and made accessible through technology from other places and/or through new and expanded partnerships and collaborations.
3. Weigh and measure all decisions related to growth in relation to the impact of each decision on the vision, mission and values of the College.
4. Encourage all involved with the decision-making that is part of managing the challenge of growth to place serving effectively the learning needs of the students and the community at the center and heart of any decision that is made. It is critical to avoid power struggles, turf protection and other threats. Clearly there are enough educational needs to be met that all those who wish to will be able to contribute to meeting through collaboration and purpose-driven decision making.

### **III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PROGRESS, AND/OR PRACTICES**

1. Mesa Community College's focus on learning that embraces the community within the college and the communities that the college serves is the hallmark of an organization whose vision, mission, and values inspire, guide, and shape the culture of an innovative and excellent organization that supports lives of learning and service for all.
2. As a learning-focused organization, the College consistently and comprehensively expects, fosters, promotes, and encourages in countless ways effective teaching, professional development, scholarship that involves learning in the discipline, pedagogical practice, innovation, and practices. There is acknowledgement in word and practice that the substance of teaching and learning and the practice of teaching and learning are important in themselves and are consciously connected to the ultimate purpose in the mission statement: "to improve the quality of life in the community we serve."
3. There is an active valuing of community that shapes the culture of the College both within and beyond the walls of the buildings and sites where teaching and learning happen. The College understands in the hearts of the people who are the college's richest resource that you both serve community and create community. The community you serve recognizes that students, faculty, and staff live quite purposely through community involvement and volunteerism, powerfully embodying the civic responsibility that is so bound up with the College's articulated values of inclusiveness and community.

4. There is a powerful understanding of the reality that community extends beyond the walls of the college, the immediate service area of Mesa Community College, and even beyond the Maricopa Community College District. In Ernest Boyer's words spoken more than ten years ago, the world may not yet be a global village, but surely our sense of neighborhood must expand. In the College's commitment to educating for competent global citizenry, in its Center for Global Tolerance, in its fostering of learning collaboration with countries around the world, actively involving students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members in opportunities to spread the good word about community colleges in general and Mesa in particular to communities and colleagues around the world, MCC is indeed improving the quality of life in the community—which is now the planet that we all call home and hold in trust for the generations that will follow us.
  
5. MCC's engagement with its many communities—connecting them with the college and with each other—is truly exemplary. Perhaps an icon or living symbol of the rich rewards and blessings of cultivating and nurturing this engagement is the Rose Garden. Growing out of an idea brought by the community and welcomed and nurtured by the College, the Rose Garden has become a vehicle that brings together retirees, traditional age students, girl scouts and boy scouts. Not only does it beautify the campus, the Rose Garden serves a research purpose—testing new varieties of roses; it contributes to the economy by being a heralded attraction for visitors; and it is connected to those growers who are responsible for 46% of the roses that are produced in this country. The commitment to the beauty of nature and stewardship for the preservation of the natural environment is also evident to equally salutary purpose in the desert garden of the Red Mountain Campus.