



Mesa Community College: A Report on the Self-Study Progress Spring 2004

Background

The Mesa Community College (MCC) Self Study is being conducted to prepare for the college's fourth comprehensive accreditation visit by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. The self study process will allow the college community to examine itself in relation to accreditation criteria, to provide evidence about those criteria, and to identify strengths, challenges, and future directions. Most importantly the self study provides the entire college community an opportunity to reflect upon our accomplishments and our potential.

The self-study report will be submitted in Fall 2004, and the accreditation visit will occur in Spring 2005. MCC is conducting the self study using the new accreditation criteria which were developed as part of the Higher Learning Commission's "Restructuring Expectations" project. The criteria are: (1) Mission and Integrity, (2) Preparing for the Future, (3) Student Learning and Effective Teaching, (4) Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge, and (5) Engagement and Service.

Goals of the Self Study

Through the involvement of the entire MCC Self-Study Committee, five major goals of the self study were defined. The final draft of the goals was approved by committee members and subsequently presented to and endorsed by the college Leadership team. The goals provide a focus and framework for the self-study work and are briefly summarized below.

1. Achieve 10-year accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association.
2. Confirm that our college practices and actions are aligned with our statements of vision, mission, values, and strategic directions.
3. Document the college's strengths and challenges, capitalizing on our strengths and systematically addressing our challenges.

4. Develop a strong sense of community through communication, collaboration, and connectedness among all college constituencies.
5. Position the college for the future.

See the “Goals of the Mesa Community College Self-Study” document (Attachment 1).

Organizational Structure

Dr. Gail Mee, Dean of Instruction, provides the administrative leadership for the accreditation process and Dr. Gayla Preisser, a faculty member from the Psychology Department, is the self-study coordinator. They work closely with the director and staff of the MCC Office of Research and Planning to coordinate the self-study effort.

The full self-study committee is comprised of over eighty individuals. The full committee is organized into smaller individual committees that address each criterion, operational indicators, communications, and the distance degree request which may be incorporated into the self-study report. Most of these committees are structured with co-chairs or tri-chairs and 10-15 committee members. The committees are:

- Resource Committee – coordinates daily operations related to all aspects of the self study;
- Steering Committee – guides and directs the work of the individual self study committees;
- Five Criteria Committees – interpret criteria and components, identify evidence, review and evaluate findings;
- Operational Indicators Committee – identifies, gathers, and prepares data to respond to operational indicators and basic institutional data forms;
- Distance Degree/Institutional Change Committee – prepares request for institutional change to offer distance degree;
- Communications and Arrangements Committee – provides support for internal and external communications, events, and publications about the self study.

Several factors were considered in selecting committee chairs and members, including:

- Identifying people who have experience and expertise with the area being studied;
- Ensuring group diversity, including diversity of gender, ethnicity, and thought and opinion;
- Involving people representing a range of administrative areas, departments, and employee groups (Faculty; Management, Administration, and Technology; Professional Staff Association; Maintenance and Operations; Crafts);
- Involving employees who are new to the college as well veterans;
- Ensuring a good representation of individuals who have or had served in leadership roles at the college.

See the Committee Organizational Chart (Attachement 2) and the Committee Member List (Attachment 3).

In addition, opportunities for student, adjunct faculty, and community involvement include:

- Representation on committees;
- Student input from a self-study student advisory committee and at committee meetings;
- Panel discussions and strategic conversation meetings;
- Surveys and interviews;
- Internet communications;
- Forums with community leaders.

Preparations

Our approach to the self study was to be highly collaborative and participatory, and to capitalize on the expertise and talents of members from the college community. We also recognized the need to be systematic and well organized. Thus, early in planning the self study we were very cognizant of the need to:

- Build a common understanding of accreditation and the self-study process;
- Educate participants about their roles and tasks;
- Develop a process and structure to facilitate the work.

Several activities were designed to build an understanding of accreditation and the self-study process. We invited our former HLC liaison, Cecilia Lopez, to address the committee about accreditation and the new criteria (See Attachment 4). We had a team of 14 people representing all of the individual committees attend the 2003 Annual Meeting of the Higher Learning Commission; another team will attend in 2004. Members of the resource team attended a number of accreditation workshops.

In order to educate committee members about their roles, the resource committee called the initial meeting of the steering committee. A charge for chairs was developed (Attachment 5). We prepared educational reading materials, created self-study notebooks, and provided informational Powerpoint presentations (Attachment 6). Individual committees met to discuss their tasks and to establish their operating procedures and schedules. Attachment 7 illustrates one example. All the committees have met regularly since Spring 2003 to accomplish the tasks.

In order to facilitate the process and to provide common structure, the self-study coordinator and the Office of Research and Planning staff developed a series of activities and templates to assist the committees in accomplishing their self-study work. Examples of supporting materials provided to the committees include an overview of accreditation and self study, guidelines for effective team members, and activities for maximizing group work. These and numerous other background materials were shared with participants early in the self-study process. Attachment 8 includes several examples.

Process/Methods

The initial charge to the criterion committees was to analyze and interpret their criteria in relation to MCC's mission, culture and environment. Committee members began their work by discussing, reaching a common understanding of, and writing interpretive statements about each of the criterion and component statements. For each criteria and component, they examined questions such as "What does this statement mean to you?" and "How does this statement relate to our self study?" The intent was that committee members personalize the criteria and consider MCC's distinctiveness and culture in relation to them. The members then used their collective expertise to identify examples of evidence in order to document and, most importantly, critically evaluate how the college fulfills the criteria and components. By the end of Summer 2003 each committee had generated numerous requests for evidence. The following worksheets aided the committee members in their tasks (See Attachment 9).

- Interpretation of Criterion and Components Document
- Examples of Evidence Worksheet
- Requests for Evidence Form

During Fall 2003 the requests for evidence were collated and organized and a comprehensive data collection plan was developed and implemented. Data collection strategies include, among others:

- College-wide strategic conversations were held at both campuses;
- Faculty and non-faculty employee surveys were conducted;
- Community survey was conducted and discussion groups were held;
- Facilitated discussions with faculty, non-faculty employees, and student groups were held;
- Department chairs and directors of non-academic departments were interviewed;
- A student opinion survey (Student Assessment of the College Environment) was conducted;
- Existing relevant documents and reports were gathered from departments and units collegewide.

Several principles guided the data collection process: adherence to good research and evaluation practice, sound methodology, verifiable or empirical approaches, and commonly applied analysis methods. The goal was to obtain credible data that committee members could then interpret and evaluate in relation to MCC's mission. Attachment 10 illustrates the evidence gathering process and Attachment 11 provides examples of data gathering instruments (sample surveys and discussion questions).

Beginning in Spring 2004 committee members will review, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate the findings and write working papers to be used in the report. A timeline was developed initially and is regularly updated; it has been followed throughout the duration of the self study (Attachment 12).

Communication

The stated communication goal for the self study is “to educate, inform, and garner enthusiasm for MCC’s self-study process by effectively communicating and engaging MCC’s internal and external community.” To accomplish this goal, a communication plan was developed and a graphic identity was designed for use on all publications and materials. We developed a list of messages to be communicated as well as appropriate communication mechanisms and a timeline. Some of the major communication tools include a self-study newsletter published twice each semester and disseminated to all internal and key external constituents, a self-study web site, regular email updates to the internal community, regular announcements in the President’s Weekly Communique, and distribution of promotional items such as pens and notepads.

Information about the accreditation self study is shared at collegewide events such as convocations and all-faculty meetings. The self-study coordinator met with the department chairs at their annual retreat and is scheduled to meet with Faculty Senate, the Professional Staff Association, and the Maintenance and Operations/Crafts group. Attachment 13 is a sample of the information shared. Students are informed through venues such as student leadership meetings, club meetings, and the student newspaper. Exhibits are planned for key display areas at both campuses.

Resources

The self study cannot be accomplished without the allocation of resources; at MCC, a budget line was created so that these resources can be formally allocated and tracked. The faculty self-study coordinator receives full reassigned time to direct, coordinate, and facilitate the many meetings, events, and activities; later in the process this will include preparation of the self-study report. An administrative assistant has been assigned to the self study to provide administrative support. An existing conference room at the college was converted into the “Self-Study Work Center” which provides a central location for administering the process, assembling resource materials, keeping files and support documentation, and accommodating needed meeting space. As needed, faculty members serving on committees receive special contracts (during the summer) or reassigned time (during the academic year) to work on self-study tasks. The staff of the Office of Research and Planning spends a considerable amount of their time working on the instrument development, data collection, analysis, and reporting for the self study. Resources also are allocated for printing, postage, supplies, and travel.

Desired Outcomes

The primary desired outcome, and our first stated goal, for the MCC self study is that the college attain its fourth 10-year accreditation without stipulations, progress reports, or focus visits. We believe that the other four stated goals are of equal importance to the future of the college. By the time the evaluation visit occurs in March 2005, the college community will have been engaged in an intensive two-year process of reflection. It will include a close examination of our vision, mission and values and how they are upheld through our practices and actions. We will have critically evaluated a wealth of data, information, and documentation – that is, our evidence – which will reveal our strengths and the aspects of our work that should be celebrated.

The critical evaluation of this same evidence will allow us to document empirically the areas that need to be improved and to develop systematic strategies for addressing our challenges.

We believe that our goal of developing a stronger sense of community through the self study will be achieved. Participants in the self study comment regularly about the value of the process in developing a better understanding of the entire college and in developing relationships with colleagues and co-workers they might otherwise never meet. Our college is large and complex. We have a broad mission. We are committed to our values of learning, excellence, community, and inclusiveness. The self study provides a unique opportunity for us to reflect collectively upon the college in its entirety, to document where we have been and what we have accomplished, and most importantly, to use what we learn to prepare for the future