

Engaging in Accreditation: Using Staff Development to Achieve Total Participation

Randall Van Wagoner and Sharon Cole Hoffman

Background

Metropolitan Community College (MCC) is a comprehensive community college consisting of three campuses and three centers throughout its four-county service area in the Omaha metropolitan region of Nebraska, which has an estimated population of 646,641. As the third largest postsecondary institution and one of six community colleges in the state, MCC offers more than a hundred one- and two-year career program options, a wide array of student support services, developmental and adult education, and continuing and noncredit education, as well as customized training for local employers. MCC serves 7,444 full-time equivalent (FTE) credit students and 334 FTE noncredit students.

Context

One of the many challenges in conducting a successful self-study is to engage all employees in the process. Some institutions try to address this by documenting the participation of each individual in the self-study process, from committee membership to moving a file cabinet for the resource room. Many institutions are able to achieve 100 percent employee involvement through this loose interpretation of the term *involvement*. The real challenge is to actively engage employees in the self-study process. MCC addressed this challenge through a three-hour required professional development course that was very well received.

Professional Development at MCC

MCC's professional development program requires all full-time regular employees to participate in a minimum of twenty-one contact hours of approved professional development activities per fiscal year. Although individualized development from book reports to professional conferences are accepted, the majority of employees fulfill this requirement by enrolling in professional development courses on site. Employees can review the in-house professional development offerings, course descriptions, facilitator biographies, time, location, and seat availability online via the college intranet. They register through the same telephone or Web registration processes students use to register for classes. All activity is tracked by the Professional Development department, which provides monthly transcript updates to employees and supervisors. One of the most important benefits of the extensive staff development offerings consistently cited by MCC employees is the opportunity to interact with staff from other departments and sites in the college's multi-campus environment.

In the twenty-one contact hours, all full-time employees are required to take one designated three-hour core course. This core course provides an opportunity for all full-time college employees to have a shared experience related to a major initiative underway at MCC. Previous core courses have focused on teamwork, organizational change, systems thinking, and communication. As preparations were being made for the self-study process, accreditation was identified as a major topic, worthy of being the focus of the core course. During the 2001–2002 academic year, 709 full-time regular employees participated in twenty-nine sections of the core course, *Daze of Our Lives: Then, Now, and Later*, which was the college's approach to reaching 100 percent participation in the self-study process. Members of the self-study steering committee and the criterion committee chairpersons volunteered to facilitate these core sessions.

What follows are segments of the required course. Even if a college lacks the infrastructure to implement a required course, one or more aspects of the course contents could be included in any institution's approach to reaching 100 percent employee involvement in the self-study process.

Course Segments

- ◇ **MCC timeline and employee history.** As an introductory activity and to get a historical perspective of who was in each session, participants placed their names and a color-coded dot corresponding to the campus or center where they worked on Post-It notes. They placed the notes on a large timeline and told the group when they began working at MCC. This brief activity gave way to extemporaneous storytelling about the early days of the college, which was wonderful for the new employees to hear. Participants then identified one significant change that occurred at the college in the past ten years or since they were employed and discussed their perspectives in small groups. For new employees, this activity served as a means to increase their institutional knowledge and better understand current organizational realities in context.
- ◇ **Student learning as the center.** After reflecting on MCC's mission, participants answered the question, "What is one thing that must happen at the college for MCC to fulfill its mission?" Through discussion, the participants were guided toward the idea that if students don't learn, the college is not fulfilling its mission. The manner in which the Higher Learning Commission holds the college accountable for student learning through the accreditation process was then presented and discussed. The group subsequently brainstormed answers to why it is important to be accredited. This was a particularly meaningful segment for participants to actively review the centrality of accreditation to the operation of the organization.
- ◇ **Organizational contrast.** Participants were placed in groups and asked to discuss one change listed on the distributed "Then and Now Fact Sheet." The fact sheet contained information pertaining to general fund expenditures, employees, enrollment profile, tuition charges, and graduates and awards, comparing data for each category in the previous ten years. Each group identified and discussed benefits and drawbacks to any changes. One person recorded the group's points, and another reported its conclusions. Large group discussions were generated with reports from the groups. Conclusions usually were that the college had significantly changed in the last ten years, which had positively and negatively impacted the organization in many ways. Good discussions and new perspectives were generated through this activity.
- ◇ **Degrees of connection to student learning.** Participants were invited to identify the number of people, steps, layers, or degrees between their jobs and student learning. For example, a faculty member is closest to student learning, a direct connection. On the other hand, janitors and some administrators may be three to four steps away from student learning but still play a vital role in creating an environment so students learn.

After this discussion, participants watched ten-minute videos of two case studies in which students shared barriers to their learning and ways that college employees had helped them through these difficulties or supported them. In most cases, the employees named were not directly connected to student learning but contributed in some way through their job responsibilities. Facilitators had the choice of seven different testimonials with summaries of college departments and functions that were mentioned. This flexibility allowed facilitators to tailor the videos to the composition of the groups. Discussions pertaining to how all employees in some way influence student learning followed. This activity demonstrated the power of the college's mission in transforming lives through the dedication of all employees.

- ◇ **Self-study and employee input.** The self-study evaluation process, including the five criteria along with the purpose of the evaluation team's visit, was explained to participants. The idea that the college completes a self-study report first was also explained. A draft of the strengths and challenges for each criterion identified through the self study was shared. Participants were asked to review those strengths and challenges and comment on their validity. Did they reflect the institution's reality? Was there anything missing? Large group discussions addressing these questions generated much thought among participants, who were then invited to write down any comments or suggestions to improve the strengths and challenges. The comments were turned in at the end of the session or were later sent to the self-study coordinator. Employee input was utilized in revising MCC's self-study report, provided that patterns of evidence were present. Some refreshing perspectives helped clarify and fine-tune a number of report areas.
- ◇ **Hallway questions.** Participants were told that any MCC employee could be asked questions by the visiting evaluation team to ensure that all employees were part of the self-study process. Employees were encouraged to answer all questions honestly and were told that it was acceptable to say they didn't know an answer if they didn't.

In order to provide guided practice for employees in answering questions, each participant drew a question from a hat. Employees could answer the questions themselves or choose someone else to respond. This activity was a fun close to the session. Interest was piqued, and new information was shared by those who did have answers.

Conclusion

Not only did this mandatory professional development course prepare all employees for the evaluation visit, but it also initiated some powerful discussions about student learning and the role of all employees in creating a positive learning environment. Thought-

provoking discussions of the college's strengths and challenges emerged from these sessions. The goal of obtaining 100 percent employee participation was achieved. However, the real benefit was the provision of an avenue for meaningful discussions among all full-time employees. People felt engaged in the accreditation process, could see their input taken seriously in the changes made to the self-study report, and had a chance to gain a variety of perspectives on the complex mission and operation of the college.

Randall Van Wagoner is Vice President of Educational Services at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska.

Sharon Cole Hoffman is Planning Coordinator at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska.