All Together Now: Synchronizing Continuous Improvement - Research Findings

*Mary Ellen Scofield, Program Review & Accreditation Specialist, Chemeketa Community College*

I took a Fall 2022 sabbatical to explore evaluation research and continuous improvement at award-winning colleges in order to improve and update our program review process — to align with college needs, new accreditation standards, and emerging trends. My top findings:

1. **Program Review is part of a larger system.** To improve communication, collaboration, effectiveness, and workload footprint, you need to rock to boat: update the full college planning and evaluation system (not just Program Review)
2. **Align and integrate:** Strategic Plan, Indicators and Action Plan; College and Unit Planning, Improvement and Evaluation; Budget planning
3. **Focus on improvement:** Improvement projects aimed at making a measurable difference in student learning, student achievement, institutional effectiveness
4. **Simplify.** Make each party's role eminently manageable; information in one place
5. **Everyone on the same page.** The best processes enjoy broad-based engagement

"This work is part of our culture. We know we are a top community college and it is a source of pride with faculty and staff. We know to continue to be a top institution, we have to use that data and look for continuous improvement opportunities." -Renea Akin, West Kentucky Community and Technical College

Conceptual image of findings/proposal
Integrate and focus all continuous improvement, including program review
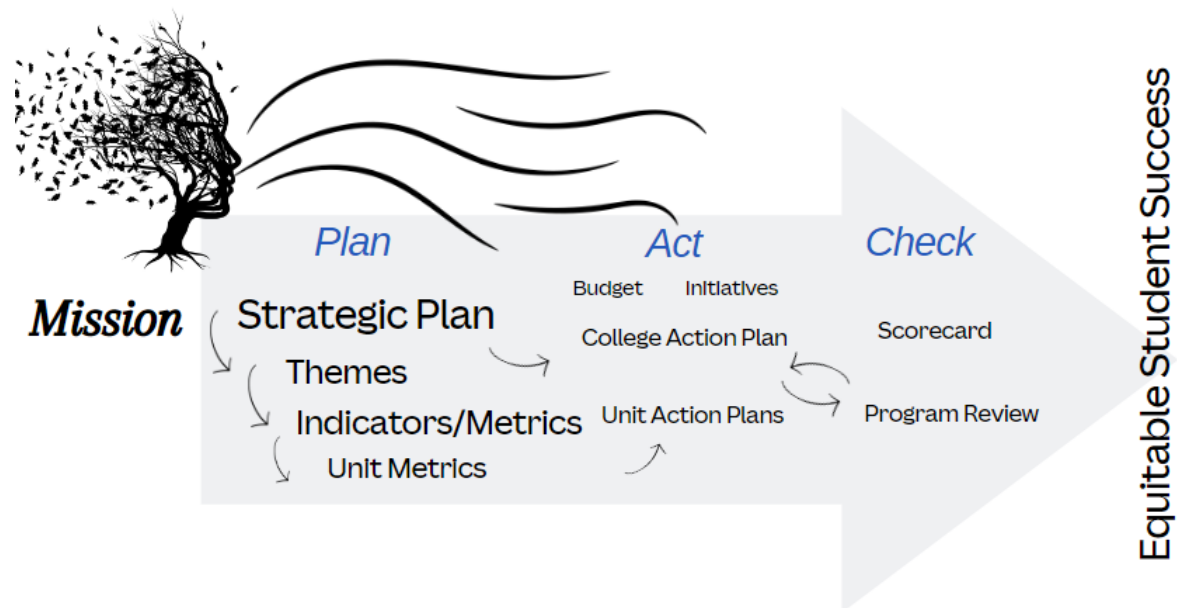
Research Details

1. External Interviews: Continuous Improvement at 6 Aspen-Recognized Colleges

I conducted interviews with strategic planning professionals at colleges that were finalists/winners of the 2021 and 2023 [Aspen Institute Prize for Community College Excellence](#). Each institution had similarities to our own college, whether designated as an Hispanic Serving Institution and/or supporting a similarly moderate-sized city/district. My theory of change: an effective continuous improvement process positions a college to excel in helping its students persist, complete credentials, and achieve living wages.

- Amarillo College, Amarillo, TX (AC)
- Broward College, Fort Lauderdale, FL (BC)
- Moorpark College, Moorpark, CA (MC)
- San Antonio College, San Antonio, TX (SAC)
- South Puget Sound Community College, Olympia, WA (SPSCC)
- West Kentucky Community and Technical College, Paducah, KY (WKCTC)

Top common continuous planning process features

All six colleges:

- Make/show a measurable difference: the focus of assessment and planning

- Review/tie directly to strategic themes/metrics

- Centralize communication/tools

- Feedback/Action Plans with follow-up to "close the loop" on plans.
  Examples:
  - Feedback/support from strategic planners/teaching and learning leaders/supervisors/leaders
  - Meetings with college leaders
  - Report cards
  - Rubric-based review/feedback from committee

Five out of six colleges

- Units chose improvement projects; may request budget support/indicate budget need (5/6)

- Evaluation (Program Review/Program Health/Metrics summary) separate from Continuous Improvement Process (plans/results/next steps) (5/6)
  - Evaluation results in a report card, memo, or action plan
  - Evaluation results in decision: Grow, Sustain, Fix, Sunset

More details by college, including number of colleges reflecting each theme:

- "Make/show a measurable difference" is the focus of continuous improvement processes (6) (4 by unit: WKCTC, SAC, AC, BC; 2 by college: MC, SPSCC)

- Centralized communication: the system, language, where to get data/forms, data format, and purpose of planning/tie to strategic plan (6)

- Review/tie process and projects to strategic themes/metrics and improvement (6)
  - Some (3; WKTCC, BC, AC) use only a few metrics in unit planning, leaving other data/metrics to review for program review/evaluation process
  - Some (3; WKTCC, BC, AC) ask units to plan their own metrics/data collection in alignment with strategic plan
  - WKTCC does not require review of standard data in its continuous improvement process; only in program review. For annual continuous improvement, they instead ask units to decide what they want to work on to improve; only requirement is that the improvement must be connected to the institutional indicators. Units collect their own data to see how well their project worked and follow-up with changes/updates.

- Leadership Feedback/Action Plans with follow-up (6) (5 by unit: MC, WKCTC, SAC, AC, BC; 1 by college: SPSCC)
  Feedback/support from office governing strategic planning, learning outcomes assessments, and/or supervisors (5) (WKCTC, SAC, AC, BC, MC)
  Report cards in response to submitted plans (2) (SAC, AC)
  Committee evaluation/feedback using rubric (1) (SAC)
  Meetings with college leaders (3) (MC, AC, BC)

- Units can request budgetary support for their improvement ideas (5) (All but SPSCC). SPSCC and MC connect institution-wide planning processes with budget planning.

- Evaluation (Program Review/Program Health/metrics summary) separate from continuous improvement process (plan/results/change) (5) (MC, WKCTC, SAC, AC, BC)
  - Evaluation results in a report card (1) (AC)
  - Evaluation results in "grade"/action plan: Grow, Sustain, Fix, Sunset (2) (BC, MC)

Additional Themes/Observations
- Standard Data reviewed
  Enrollment
  Outcomes Assessment
  Successful course completion
  Retention
  Transfer
  Credential Completion (including successful degree completion at transfer destinations)

Additional data interests
Summary equity gap metrics (e.g. range between performance of different groups)
Average # of credits students take before earning a two-year degree
Transferability
% of GE courses transferable to major
Student experience/focus groups

- **WKCTC** and **Moorpark** called out favoring investment in professional development in researched best practices to improve student success metrics.

- In terms of planning, two outliers of the six peer institutions I connected with are Moorpark and South Puget Sound, which **work as a college**, and not by unit, to develop/track plans for institutional indicator improvement.

  Moorpark focuses unit review on state/accreditation compliance. It puts the majority of its efforts towards 1) following and/or doing research on practices and adopting promising practices and 2) ensuring units get meetings with leadership every three years to review status/aspirations and . Coupled with this is an annual collegewide budget/indicators review process, where everyone collegewide is invited to weigh in on how to improve metrics.

  SPCCC focuses all work on improving metrics, and keeps track of progress through spreadsheets that are reviewed in groups (departments, divisions) at least twice a year in time for a college-wide progress update. Individual unit plans are integrated into the college operational plan. They have just begun an outcomes assessment 3-year cycle review process, piloted last year, for each individual academic area.

  A third slightly less structured system was at **WKCTC**. The strategic planning department charges everyone with making improvements, and focusing their improvements. Academic units do both operational plans and assessment plans. They do this work every year, and are charged with collecting data on whatever their plan is to show improvement in, aligned with institutional metrics. Standard data reviewed for program review, required by the state.

2. Readings/Course Themes

Guiding Concepts

Evaluation as Partner to Activity
    Refines strategy
    Drives adaptation to changes
    Responsive

Specifies the change you want to see
Centers continuous inquiry

Improvement is iterative
Revise plans and strategies as you go - not necessarily a set beginning and end point
Evaluation as improvement guide

Design for Majority in the Middle
Design processes so they are effective for the middle - not the overachievers, because they'll achieve anyway, and not the nay-sayers, because they nay-say anyway. Middle is where most people live and work, and they become the base for fueling buy-in.

Leaders Play Key Role
For an organization to benefit from accreditation-required processes and accreditation itself, leaders play a critical role. They align to help craft and then continuously convey a centralized message and emphasize everyone's involvement:
- Accreditation/Strategic Planning/Unit Review connected and valuable
- Accreditation provides valuable feedback that helps us do a good job for our community/students
- Taking action to address accreditation principles and recommendations helps us improve

Use Comparisons
Peers
Historical performance
Randomized controlled trial research, if possible

Change theory supports effective design
Theory of Change: articulated assumptions underlying how the activity you design might result in quality/improvements
Consider context
Employ existing assets
Articulating your theory of change is an increasingly important component in grant proposals. Funders ask how change will happen.

Design Principles

Show connections between parts
Show how institutional, initiative, and unit planning evaluation align
Backwards design - where do you want to end up?
Draw concept models

Focus using research questions/goals
What are you trying to change?
What do you hope to achieve?

Avoid too general questions, reports, or data without framework

Mixed research methods yield best information
Qualitative research design - interviews, theme summaries
Indicators helpful and limited. Keep in mind they don't represent a full picture
Quantitative research provides helpful information even if it doesn't meet gold standard of randomized controlled trials

Research Sources
Interviews

Akin, Renae. Vice President, Academic Affairs, West Kentucky Community and Technical College, Paducah, KY. July 15, 2022.

Babb, Tina. Executive Director, Institutional Effectiveness, Amarillo College, Amarillo, TX. November 30, 2022.

Bespalov, Oleg. Dean, Institutional Effectiveness, Moorpark College, Moorpark, CA, December 1, 2022.

Coronado, Ester. Interim Director, Strategic Initiatives, Integrated Planning and Performance Excellence, San Antonio College, San Antonio, TX. July 13, 2022.

Gibson, Kandeice. Senior Director, Institutional Planning and Effectiveness, Broward College, Fort Lauderdale, FL. December 1, 2022.

Tuia, Jennifer, Director of Institutional Research and Heather Ryan, Director of Student Learning Assessment. South Puget Sound Community College, Olympia, WA. December 5, 2022.

References

Aspen Institute. (2023). *Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.*
https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize/

Covey, S. (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Simon and Schuster.

Bryant Edwards, T. & Zentner, A. (2023, April 28). *Strengthening program review practices to support meaningful planning and outcomes.* COACHes Friday SLO Talk. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6lH9rMqan8

Desveaux, L., Mitchell, J. I., Shaw, J., & Ivers, N. M. (2017).Understanding the impact of accreditation on quality in healthcare: A grounded theory approach. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 29(1), 941–947.

https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzx136

Heath, D. (2020). *Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems Before They Happen*. Simon and Schuster.

Gawande, A. (2021, August 23). Costa Ricans live longer than we do. What's the secret? *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/08/30/costa-ricans-live-longer-than-we-do-whats-the-secret

Gawande, A. (2017, January 17). The heroism of incremental care. *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/the-heroism-of-incremental-care

Google Career Certificates. (2023). Foundations: Data, Data, Everywhere [MOOC]. Coursera. https://www.coursera.org/learn/foundations-data?specialization=google-data-analytics

Lederman, D. (2022, November 8). How Colleges Measure and Prove Their Value. [Podcast transcript]. In *The Key: With Inside Higher Ed*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/11/10/how-colleges-measure-and-prove-their-value-key-podcast

Reinholz, D. L. & Andrews, T.C. (2020) Change theory and theory of change: what's the difference anyway? *International Journal of STEM Education 7*(2). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-020-0202-3

Requa, C. J. (2021). *Making institutional accreditation more efficient, effective, and meaningful.* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington.] https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/edd_capstones/63//uploads/files/content/docs/pubs/UsingComparativeInformationGuide.pdf

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. (2014) *Using comparative information to improve student success.* The Aspen Institute. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content

Tyson, C. (2014, September 10). The 'Murky Middle.' *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/09/10/maximize-graduation-rates-colleges-should-focus-middle-range-students-research-shows#.Y8gdDuFhD9M.link

Westat, J. F. (Ed.). (2010). *NSF Handbook- User friendly Guide to Evaluation*. National Science Foundation. https://www.purdue.edu/research/oevprp/docs/pdf/2010NSFuser-friendlyhandbookforprojectevaluation.pdf

Wyner, J. (2021). The role of presidents, trustees, and college leaders in student success. College Excellence Program, Aspen Institute. https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/role-of-senior-leaders-in-student-success/