

MESALANDS COMMUNITY COLLEGE
ACADEMY FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING
RESULTS FORUM IMPACT REPORT¹

September 7, 2012

- 1. Describe your Academy project(s) as developed at the first Roundtable. Be as detailed as possible about the issues it was intended to address as well as the content and strategies of the project itself. Include in your discussion your reasons for joining the Academy and the degree to which you have dealt with those reasons. If you enrolled in the Academy in response to the recommendation of a site evaluation team, explain how you Academy work addressed the issues raised in that report.**

On April 19-21, 2004, The Higher Learning Commissions' Accreditation Team performed a Comprehensive Evaluation visit to Mesalands Community College. The Team identified a number of problem areas in its follow-up report regarding the College's assessment of student academic achievement. The following briefly summarizes the Team's major findings:

- No "evidence of assessment findings at the program or institutional level."
- "...course-level performance objectives exceed the expectations of student performance at the program level."
- "...not clear where identified program level outcomes are taught."
- "A number of general education outcomes at the program and course level are not expressed in measurable terms."
- Specific changes to the curriculum based on results of assessment are neither identified nor evaluated.
- Lack of documentable evidence of the academic achievement of students who complete the curricula.

In the same report, the Team made a number of observations/ recommendations/ suggestions to address the identified problem areas. They are as follows:

- The collection, interpretation and use of assessment data should occur at all levels - course, program and institutional outcomes.
- "There should be documentable evidence of the academic achievement of the students who complete the curricula" and linking this information to "the structure and content of the educational program and the effectiveness of teaching."
- The results of the assessment process should be widely communicated with all shareholders.
- Assessment processes must be established that are continuous and provide meaningful and useful information.

¹ All documents referenced in this Report can be found on the College's website at www.mesalands.edu.

- Develop “an identifiable and coherent undergraduate general education component as well as rubrics for consistently evaluating general education learning outcomes across the curriculum.”

The Team went on to state that assessment activities need to be “...more formally measured, articulated, and documented at the College.”

The Accreditation Team indicated that the follow-up Progress Report on Student Learning Outcomes was due on 07/01/09 and should address the following points:

- 1) Demonstrate consistency in evaluation of clearly defined general education learning objectives/outcomes.
- 2) Clearly articulate relationships between course and program-level outcomes.
- 3) Document evidence of the efficacy of curricular and instructional changes made as a result of assessment feedback.

Mesalands Community College was presented with (and accepted) the opportunity to participate in the Higher Learning Commission’s Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning as a means to address present and future assessment needs. Participation in the Academy was in lieu of completion of the 07/01/09 Progress Report on Student Learning Outcomes. Participation in the Academy was intended to address the Accreditation Team’s findings. The Team’s findings were used as the College’s guide during the four year Academy commitment to develop and implement an “Action Portfolio” (also referred to as the Student Learning Plan) to address the identified problem areas. The Plan was entitled *Beyond the Basics: Reinventing Assessment at Mesalands Community College*. To that end, the goal of the plan was to significantly overhaul assessment of student learning at the College while attempting to build upon what positive assessment practices were already in place. As is evident from the Accreditation Team’s follow-up report, the College’s assessment plan was nearly non-existent. The Student Learning Assessment Committee (SLAC) was charged with developing and implementing this Action Portfolio.

The specific changes the College made as a result of the SLAC’s work in the Academy are addressed in question #4.

2. Describe any changes that you made to the project(s)—or that had to be made to it—other than personnel changes. What were the reasons for these changes? Did the changes improve the project?

The College’s initial focus as decided upon at the November 2008, Academy was to begin addressing student learning assessment at the program level. It became apparent very early on that our attempts to address issues at the program level could not fully succeed without also dealing with deficits at the course and institutional levels as well. Program-level assessment includes both student learning assessment at the course level as well as attainment of the College’s general education competencies. Addressing assessment at all three levels simultaneously (course, program and institution) was required to effectively address the Accreditation Team’s findings. Initially, the complete overhaul of the College’s assessment program was a very

daunting endeavor. Although implementation of the plan has led to significant improvements in the assessment of student learning, the extensive scope of the project within our self-imposed four-year time frame has presented some hurdles. We realized that we may have had “bitten off more than we could chew”.

3. What challenges to the success of your project arose in your four Academy years? How did you deal with those challenges?

Numerous challenges have been encountered during our four year Academy commitment.

- Faculty did not appreciate the need to “take ownership” of assessing their academic programs. Genuine and meaningful assessment was relatively new to faculty and they had a difficult time recognizing that assessment can and should be used to improve the teaching-learning relationship. It needed to be made clear that results from assessment would not be used in a punitive way. Although faculty was encouraged to use the plan→do→study→adjust cycle of assessment, they were also given the opportunity to develop this cycle based on the unique characteristics and needs of their programs. Having said that, the vast majority of faculty requested specific instructions on what they “needed to do.” In order to address their request, the SLAC developed a *Student Learning Assessment Program Report* template that gave examples of how program directors and lead faculty could assess course, program and institutional level outcomes with the goal of making individual program reports specific to the distinctiveness of each program while using data to drive positive change to the quality and quantity of learning taking place. While attempting to facilitate improvement in the quality and completeness of each program report, we emphasized that the template was only meant as an example or guide. The report must be useful to all program stakeholders and a one-size-fits-all approach was not what we wanted or needed.
- Faculty had a hard time understanding how and why assessment of the College’s general education competencies was a critical component of program assessment. To address this, simple rubrics were developed for each general education competency. These rubrics were created in such a way that, for example, the mathematical reasoning rubric could be used in either a construction technology course or an algebra course in order to assess the students’ attainment of that specific competency. This approach allowed faculty to recognize that the knowledge base established in the general education courses was not the sole responsibility of the Arts and Sciences faculty and was critical to the success of students in all degree programs.
- Inclusion of adjunct faculty, especially off-site faculty, in the assessment process was initially and remains a challenge. Since adjunct faculty make up a significant proportion of the College’s faculty, it was critical to include them in the assessment process as well as educate them on why assessment is important to the teaching-learning relationship. The *Student Learning Assessment Guide for Faculty* was created to identify the step-by-step process of assessment. Face-to-face meetings between the chair of the SLAC and all off-campus faculty occurs every fall semester

providing opportunities to educate adjunct faculty on exactly what is assessment and how it can be used to improve learning.

4. What have you achieved as a result of your work in the Academy? Consider the range of these achievements, from the very specific (development of a rubric) to the more general (outcomes-based curriculum approval processes). To what degree have these achievements been institutionalized?

As indicated in the response to question #2, the SLAC's goal was to address student learning assessment at all three levels – course, program and institution. The following summarizes our work and achievements as it relates to each of those three levels.

Institutional Level Achievements:

- Development of a “Student Learning Assessment and Retention” link on the College’s website.
- Initiated a biannual faculty and staff training day devoted to all things assessment. This recurring event is referred to as “Assessment Day” and occurs during the fall and spring semesters.
- Development and annual distribution of the *Student Learning Assessment Guide for Faculty*. This comprehensive guide is distributed to all faculty and documents in a step-by-step format the assessment process at the College.
- The following general education competencies were rewritten:
 - Writing
 - Oral Presentation
 - Information Technology
 - Critical Thinking
 - Scientific Reasoning
 - Mathematical Reasoning
- The following rubrics were developed:
 - Writing
 - Oral Presentation
 - Information Technology
 - Critical Thinking
 - Scientific Reasoning
 - Mathematical Reasoning
- Implementation of the “Writing Across the Curriculum” initiative which requires all faculty (across all College educational sites and delivery modes) to assess the writing general education competency utilizing the College rubric.
- *Assessing Assessment Report* was developed, implemented and presented to program directors/lead faculty regarding assessment efforts as presented in their respective *Student Learning Assessment Program Reports*. The goal of this annual report is to provide constructive feedback to program directors/lead faculty regarding the quality and quantity of their assessment efforts as well as their efforts on “closing the loop” with the ultimate goal of improving student learning.

- Initiation of formal assessment-related training for adjunct faculty at off campus sites.
- Implementation of the *General Education Competency Reporting Schedule* to assess general education competency attainment across all College education sites and delivery methods (see response to questions #10).
- Development and implementation of a capstone portfolio course to more effectively capture College-wide general education competency attainment (required of all degree-seeking students during their last semester prior to graduation).
- *Student Learning Assessment* informational brochure was developed, distributed and reviewed with students attending fall and spring semester new student orientations as well as with all students enrolled in ACS 100: Student College Success courses.

Program Level Achievements:

- Identification of seventeen directors/lead faculty responsible for leading assessment at the program level.
- Revised the format of the annual *Student Learning Assessment Program Report* utilizing a plan→do→study→adjust cycle of assessment
- Revisited and, when necessary, rewrote program objectives for all applied science programs.
- All program directors/lead faculty performed curriculum mapping in order to identify where program-level outcomes are taught in the respective plans of study. This information is included in the individual *Student Learning Assessment Program Reports*.
- All program directors/lead faculty identified multiple measurement tools and goal results to assess whether or not program objectives were accomplished to a predetermined level. This information is included in the individual *Student Learning Assessment Program Reports*.
- All program directors/lead faculty implemented a plan→do→study→adjust cycle of assessment in order to determine how well program objectives are being accomplished. This information is included in the individual *Student Learning Assessment Program Reports*.
- All program directors/lead faculty implemented a plan→do→study→adjust cycle of assessment in order to determine general education competency attainment. This information is included in the individual *Student Learning Assessment Program Reports* as well as the *SLAC Annual Report*.
- All program directors/lead faculty document their program assessment activities via a *Student Learning Assessment Program Report* as well as establish assessment processes that are continuous and provide meaningful and useful information. Implementing curricular changes and documenting how these changes affected learning (closing the loop) are a critical component of the program reports.

Course Level Achievements:

- Course syllabi format was evaluated and significantly modified for all College courses.
- Individual course objectives for all College courses were reviewed and, when necessary, rewritten to be measureable (and include a performance, condition and criterion).
- The end-of-semester *MCC Faculty Outcomes Assessment Form* was rewritten in order to capture more meaningful/useful assessment results.
- Preselected courses were evaluated via embedded assessment in order to determine if the quality and quantity of learning is similar across different educational sites and delivery methods.

5. What effect has your time in the Academy had on institutional commitment to the assessment of learning? How broad is that commitment? How has institutional capacity for assessing student learning changed?

6. What effect has your Academy work had on institutional culture, structures, and processes?

Participation in the Academy has given the College, from the top down, a sense of urgency in terms of addressing the significant deficiencies outlined in the Team's Report. It has focused us on the importance of assessment and how it can be used to improve the most significant activity that occurs at the College...learning.

Effective assessment of student learning is a matter of commitment, not a matter of compliance. To that end, Mesalands Community College has dedicated itself to establishing a culture of assessment embedded in every aspect of the educational process. Assessment is a key consideration at the College whenever decisions are made that may impact academic affairs.

What is assessment and why it is important is a theme that is establishing itself as a part of the culture at the College. It is discussed at every fall and spring employee convocation, every fall and spring new student orientation, every beginning of semester faculty meeting, every fall and spring adjunct faculty orientation and at semester meetings between academic affairs and student services and between collegiate and pre-collegiate faculty. Student learning assessment is now a part of the faculty's annual evaluation and is recognized as a critical job duty when hiring new faculty. The President of the College has been challenged to ask any faculty or staff member what is assessment and get a response demonstrating an understanding of the assessment culture.

The Academy student learning plan is a living, breathing document that will mature and change as the College identifies the most effective and efficient methods of understanding, confirming and improving student learning. Recognition that assessment is ever-changing and never-ending allows for continuous innovation as

faculty are encouraged to modify and experiment with their teaching in order to constantly improve learning without fear of failure.

7. What effect has your Academy work had on student learning?

8. What concrete evidence do you have to demonstrate the effects you described in questions 5-7?

As can be seen in the response to question #4, the College has implemented considerable changes to the assessment process in a relatively short period of time. Because of this complete overhaul and due to the fact that Mesalands is a small, rural community college, the small student population and data that goes along with the College's size necessitates that analysis of assessment data take place over the course of a year or two in order to ensure a large enough sample size (n) to make valid judgments on how much learning is taking place. The College is just beginning to collect enough data to begin making positive changes to the teaching-learning relationship. We realize that time is needed to fully implement the assessment process as well as understand data as it becomes more meaningful. The *SLAC Annual Report* documents the plan→do→study→adjust cycle of student learning assessment and how this process has impacted learning at the College thus far.

9. What do you see as the next logical steps for continuing the work you have begun in the Academy? In particular, what new student learning initiatives do you see developing from your Academy work?

Based on the substantial number of changes we have made as a result of our work in the Academy as identified in question #4, the College believes that the next logical step would be to allow time for these changes to be fully realized while making any necessary modifications accordingly.

Additional learning initiatives the College has identified and plans to pursue are as follows:

- 1) Begin establishing a plan→do→study→adjust cycle of assessment in Student Services.
- 2) Begin establishing a plan→do→study→adjust cycle of assessment in the Education Services Center where the pre-collegiate program is housed.
- 3) Begin collecting data from students completing their program of study and their employers in order to assess how successful the College is at placing graduates into the workforce and then using this information to improve student learning.

10. What plans have you made to sustain the energy and momentum of your Academy work?

Mesalands Community College is a small, rural, independent community college with approximately 15 full-time faculty. Neither the faculty members nor the chair of the SLAC are given release time or compensated for their committee activities. Therefore

the energy and momentum required to continue and grow the Academy work will require a highly dedicated and unselfish effort from all members of the College community. The College is attempting to put processes in place to sustain our efforts regardless of who is leading the assessment of student learning charge. A number of these processes include the following:

- 1) Require annual *Student Learning Assessment Program Reports* with focus on using the assessment data to drive positive changes in the teaching-learning relationship.
- 2) Annual *Assessing Program Assessment* reports which attempt to provide constructive feedback to program directors/lead faculty in regards to their assessment efforts.
- 3) Continually educating full-time and adjunct faculty on assessment and how to use it to improve learning. Formalized educational opportunities occur every fall and spring semester during Assessment Day.
- 4) Specific general education competencies are assessed and reported on each year with the goal of implementing and reviewing curricular adjustments to improve learning on a three year cycle.

**GENERAL EDUCATION COMPETENCIES*
PROGRAM REPORTING SCHEDULE**

Report Year	Academic Cycle	General Education Competencies Assessed
2009-2010	Summer 2009, Fall 2009, Spring 2010	Writing
2010-2011	Summer 2010, Fall 2010, Spring 2011	Oral Presentation and Critical Thinking
2011-2012	Summer 2011, Fall 2011, Spring 2012	Mathematical or Scientific Reasoning and Informational Technology
2012-2013	Summer 2012, Fall 2012, Spring 2013	Writing
2013-2014	Summer 2013, Fall 2013, Spring 2014	Oral Presentation and Critical Thinking
2014-2015	Summer 2014, Fall 2014, Spring 2015	Mathematical or Scientific Reasoning and Informational Technology
2015-2016	Summer 2015, Fall 2015, Spring 2016	Writing
2016-2017	Summer 2016, Fall 2016, Spring 2017	Oral Presentation and Critical Thinking

*General Education Competencies:

- Communication – Writing
- Communication – Oral Presentation
- Communication – Information Technology
- Critical Thinking
- Scientific Reasoning
- Mathematical Reasoning