

Export/Save this report:

Acrobat (PDF) File

Export

Back to FoEtec

**Learning Dimension Report**

McHenry County College

*Foundations Institutions deliver curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage new students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the institutional mission, students' academic and career goals, and workplace expectations.* Both in and out of the classroom, these learning experiences promote critical thinking, ethical decision making, and the lifelong pursuit of knowledge.

**Committee Leader:**

Patricia King

**Committee Members:**

Jonathan Birnbaum

Teresa Bossert

Linda Brogan

Bob Reass

The Foundations of Excellence project has allowed for the examination of diverse aspects of learning in relation to first-year students at McHenry County College including learning goals, instructional methods used to engage students, assessment of high-enrollment courses, student placement, high drop, failure, withdrawal, and incomplete rates, and learning through extracurricular activities. The current situation and opportunities and challenges have been assessed based on various sources of evidence. Recommendations for transformation to improve student learning are the result of this process.

**Current Situation:**

One area of focus for this project was McHenry County College's student learning goals. The institution's general education goals are designed to encompass the entire student body. Although the college's goals are not tailored to first year students, the College Experience course, MCC 101, provides learning goals specifically designed for these students while concentrating on problem solving/critical thinking, time management, diversity, and personal responsibility. The learning goals for the College Experience course are consistent with the institutional and general education goals of the college.

The Counseling Department offers programs designed to help students learn about career pathways and workplace expectations and is not alone in emphasizing to students the need to choose a career path early in their college career. The advisors also stress this need as well as the need to choose the school to which they would like to transfer.

Another area of interest was the system in place for evaluating instructional methods to increase student engagement in learning. TABS, Teaching Assessment By Students, the process by which students evaluate instructors, is used in combination with classroom observation by the Executive Dean and/or Department Chair during the first three years of employment. Student evaluations are also distributed in all courses. Instructors are encouraged to use Classroom Assessment Techniques, CATs, to continuously assess student learning and instructional methods to assist in improving the course.

The project also reviewed the assessment of five courses with the highest enrollment of first-year students including Composition I, ENG 151, Introduction to Psychology, PSY 151, The College Experience, MCC 101, Computer Literacy, CIS 110, and Elementary Algebra, MAT 095. A department-wide assessment is performed for each of these courses. Transformation of these courses takes place based on the results of the assessment. To further the culture of assessment, MCC hosted the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Community College Assessment Fair for area community colleges on March 2, 2007.

This project examined the placement of students into appropriate courses. Placement tests, enrollment in honors courses, advising, and counseling were all reviewed to assess the placement of students. Below are the findings from each of these areas.

There are various opportunities for placement including English, reading, and math placement tests, AP tests, proficiency exams, and ACT results. All full-time students must take placement tests unless they took the ACT within the past two years and earned a score of 21 in English, 18 in Reading, and 25 in math. Part-time students take placement tests prior to registering for a class requiring them to do so.

Enrollment in honors courses is based on students' grade point averages and ACT scores. Students who meet the criterion for honors classes are encouraged to register by advisors, counselors, or faculty members, but enrollment is voluntary.

According to interviews conducted with members of the Advising and Counseling Departments, 70% of full time students attend orientation. Two-thirds of students are part-time. The advisors estimate that about 50% of students do not see an advisor, which may translate into improper course selection for their abilities. The information regarding degree requirements for certificate and transfer students needs to be revised for easier use and should be readily available to students. In addition, a matrix may need to be developed to assist students who are not receiving advising.

Students are referred to counseling if they need help exploring career options, are dealing with personal issues, or if they are struggling with academics. Any full or part-time student with 24 credit hours and a GPA lower than 2.0 is required to work one-on-one with a counselor before registering for a class. Beginning intervention earlier may help increase the students' success.

The faculty/staff survey asked the following question: For your course(s) that enroll(s) new students, to what degree do you: Initiate communication, early in the term, with students who are performing poorly? The faculty responses are as follow: 15 answered moderate, 30 answered high, 37 answered very high, and 4 answered don't know/not applicable. Although faculty responses were promising, timely notification of poor performance from all faculty members can encourage students to seek necessary help earlier in the semester.

During this study, the degree to which the institution addresses the cause of high drop, fail, withdrawal, and incomplete rates for courses with high enrollment of first-year students was investigated. The percentage of students within the new student cohort receiving DFWI grades as calculated and reported in table E2 of the Current Practices Inventory is as follows: Composition I, ENG 151: 29%, Introduction to Psychology, PSY 151: 38%, The College Experience, MCC 101: 24%, Computer Literacy, CIS 110: 30%, and Elementary Algebra, MAT 095: 52%.

It is acknowledged that incoming freshmen need to be adequately prepared to handle the challenges of a college course load. Basic to this are skills in communication (written and oral) and computational/problem solving skills (basic mathematics). Since we utilize an open enrollment philosophy, it is our responsibility to provide remedial teaching required to prepare students for the college course load.

A study by the Office of Institutional Research of full-time students over the past 11 years revealed some startling facts. Dividing that time period into two segments; up to and including year 2000 and post year 2000, reveals a growing negative trend.

In writing skills: pre 2001 - 17% of students came unprepared to do college level work. Post 2000 - 22.9% of students came unprepared to do college level work. After taking an MCC remedial course: pre 2001 - 70.8% demonstrated proficiency (achieved a C or better.) Post 2000 - 80.6% demonstrated proficiency.

In math skills: pre 2001 - 36.75% of students came unprepared to do college level work. Post 2000 - 54.7% of students came unprepared to do college level work. After taking an MCC remedial course: pre 2001 - 55.8% demonstrated proficiency (achieved a C or better.) Post 2000 - 54.7% demonstrated proficiency.

There is, in fact, an impediment to learning due to the high level of unprepared students that enter the system. Many of these unprepared students begin their college level work in courses that require them to provide written exposition and analysis without the proper prerequisites in these basic skills.

The same can be said about courses that require a level of computational/problem solving skills without the appropriate prerequisite in these skill areas. This lack of proper preparation has remained fairly constant over the 11 years studied for this analysis in writing skills but has almost doubled during this period in computational/problem solving skills.

Another area of focus for this project included the learning that results from attending extracurricular activities. An interview with members of the Student Life Department revealed there is cooperation between Student Life and faculty on many of the programs offered by the department. Faculty members often encourage students to attend out-of-class events and activities and at times offer extra credit. It is, however, difficult to require students to attend. Instructors may or may not document any learning from these experiences.

The faculty/staff survey asked the following question: For your course(s) that enroll(s) new students, to what degree do you: Encourage students to participate in course-related, out-of-class events (e.g. lectures, concerts, exhibits)? The faculty responses included: 10 answered slight, 24 answered moderate, 23 answered high, and 27 answered very high.

Student Life documents student learning outcomes from its many and varied activities - most often by numbers and from feedback forms. For example, attendees of career workshops complete a feedback form. During voting drives, in which students are informed about voting and voter registration, "learning outcomes" are based on the number of students who register to vote.

Students taking MCC 101, The College Experience, are required to attend an extracurricular activity offered through MCC. They must complete a form documenting learning that occurred as a result of the activity.

Fifteen full-time faculty members across various divisions were asked about student involvement in extracurricular activities and documentation of learning outcomes from these activities. Twelve of the fifteen reported they encourage students to attend out-of-class activities, especially those related to class curriculum. Eleven of these twelve faculty members ask students to submit feedback in the form of a reflection paper or discussion.

### **Opportunities and Challenges:**

The Curriculum Promotion and Renewal standing committee of the Curriculum and Academic Policy Council, CAPC, is currently revising the general education goals, which poses a challenge to developing learning goals specifically for first-year students. This project should be completed spring 2007; therefore, it will be completed prior to the recommendations from the Foundations of Excellence committee.

The documentation of instructional techniques used to engage student learning could be a difficult task for several reasons. The topic of instructional methods is strongly linked to the faculty's sense of their academic freedom and ability to be innovative, creative, and flexible in the methods they use in the classroom. Documentation may cause faculty members to fear mandatory use of a specific method, as the same technique used by two different faculty members is likely to yield a different effect in the classroom.

Much like the topic of "personality," the dynamics of teaching methods do not easily lend themselves to being quantified. This leads to the questions, "Do methods need to be 'documented'" and "is it possible to measure a specific outcome for a particular method?" Instructional methods are often very unique, qualitative, fluid, and modified on the spot, in the classroom.

The Foundations of Excellence Student Survey included a series of questions specific to MCC. These questions were intended to evaluate the students' opinions regarding the academic experiences they found most engaging and beneficial. Student opinions were evaluated using different question formats. Specific results are detailed here.

Student Responses to the following question:

**"How useful have the following been to your understanding/learning of course material?" (Reported by % of all students selecting each option)**

	Very useful	Useful	Somewhat useful	Not useful	Totally not useful	Not applicable
Class Discussions	32.4	33.1	22.1	6.4	3.7	2.3
Lectures	19.8	36.6	31.5	7.0	3.0	2.0
Group Work	14.0	33.1	30.1	12.7	6.0	4.0
Hands-on activities	19.7	24.4	18.1	6.4	2.7	28.8
Videos	15.4	26.8	25.8	13.1	4.0	14.8
Case Studies	8.7	24.8	24.8	10.4	4.4	26.8
Student presentations	7.0	22.1	26.1	15.4	5.4	24.1

The results indicate that students find classroom discussions to be one of their most valuable means of improving their understanding of course material. Lectures rank second, based on students' evaluations. The results also revealed that group work was found to be preferred by females slightly more than males, but the opposite was true for videos, with males showed a slight preference. There is also evidence that "hands-on" classroom activities are regarded as having a positive influence on student learning, however more than 25% of the students have not experienced that in their classroom experiences. It is worth noting that students rated classroom presentations by their peers as the least useful experience for learning class material.

In the survey students were asked to prioritize the instructional methods identified above. Responses to the question: "Of the following teaching methods, which one have you found the **most useful** in helping you learn course material?" (In other words, students had to pick only one method.) Results include the following:

- Class discussions were rated as the "most useful" classroom experience (31.4% of students)
- Lectures ranked second (29.7%)
- "Hands-on" activities/experiments were valued, but by far fewer students (18.9%)
- Group Work ranked fourth (12.5%)
- Student speeches (in non-speech classes), and case studies were ranked lowest (less than 5% for each).

The results indicate that faculty members who include opportunities for class discussions along with lectures are incorporating techniques that students regard as useful classroom experiences. Obviously integrating other teaching methods in "smaller doses" has potential to create a very engaging classroom from the students' perspective.

It may be beneficial to provide more opportunities to learn about various methods and incorporate them into one's classroom. Faculty members may work with Professional Development in providing workshops and learning opportunities for faculty to explore instructional methods.

Current assessment practices appear to be effective across courses with the highest enrollment of first-year students. MCC has strongly emphasized the need and value of assessment. There is a liaison from each division on the Assessment Team, which allows for faculty members to receive continuous updates on strategies for improving student-learning outcomes in their courses. An additional strength is TracDat, a platform that is used by department chairs to input assessment practices that are being used within their department as well as the results and transformation.

Based on assessment practices, the structure of MCC 101 has undergone a dramatic change. Revisions are now being made to the assessment tool to allow for continuous improvement of the course.

Success of student placement in appropriate courses has increased with the development of placement tests. The Honors program, placement tests, the Advising Department, and the Sage Learning Center all pose opportunities for increased success in student placement, some while facing challenges.

The Honors program will consider adding more classes, but as a result, there may be overlapping schedules for honors courses. A challenge currently faced is the lack of clarity of the Honors program criterion, especially at times of low enrollment. The Honors program may increase community building through the MCC 101 honors offering, promoting individual honors courses, and offering learning communities. The program hopes to strengthen ties with Phi Theta Kappa and to better inform students of the nature of the honors program.

The lack of preparation for placement tests can cause less accurate student placement in classes. More needs to be done to stress the need to prepare for placement tests.

The Advising Department has concerns about turnover in part-time advising staff and about retaining high-quality advisors. The department may begin hiring retired persons to fill the need for part-time advisors, which may negate the issues of advancement and benefits. There is also a need to enhance the relationship between faculty members and advisors, as parity is an issue.

The Sage Learning Center is critical to student success. It is important to increase the visibility and institutional support for the Sage Learning Center.

The faculty/staff survey asked the following question: For your course(s) that enroll(s) new students, to what degree do you: Initiate communication, early in the term, with students who are performing poorly? The faculty responses are as follows: 15 answered moderate, 30 answered high, 37 answered very high, and 4 answered don't know/not applicable. The responses are promising, but there is room for improvement.

Although there is some faculty encouragement of extracurricular activities and documentation of learning, one of the challenges that is currently faced is the difficulty of requiring students to attend activities outside of class. There is not an easily accessible source of documentation of faculty requiring attendance at extracurricular activities. Not all faculty members track attendance at outside activities and/or give assignments to determine student-learning outcomes. A survey of all faculty members would be helpful to determine if and how many faculty members are documenting student-learning outcomes of out-of-class events. There may be a possible lack of participation due to the multiple surveys faculty members have recently been asked to complete. However, individual interviews were completed with faculty members.

#### **Sources of Evidence:**

The faculty/staff survey results, student survey results, and the Current Practices Inventory, CPI, were used as sources of evidence.

The following were helpful in examining McHenry County College's learning goals:

- Sharon Archaki, Coordinator of the Advising and Transfer Center
- MCC's institutional goals
- MCC's general education goals
- Members of the Counseling Department
- Marilyn Zopp, The College Experience Department Chair
- Mike Reagan, Chair of the Curriculum Promotion and Renewal standing committee of CAPC

In order to assess the documentation of instructional methods used to engage student learning, Teresa Bossert, Instructor of Psychology, devised a survey that was sent to instructors of courses with high enrollments of first-year students.

The following people were consulted when gathering data on the degree to which the institution documents and evaluates the student learning outcomes of high-enrollment courses:

- Dr. Joann Scholtes, English Department Chair
- Dr. Carol Chandler, Psychology/Sociology/Anthropology Department Chair
- Scott Persky, Computer Information Systems Department Chair
- Diane Terlep, Math Department Chair

Several sources were utilized when analyzing the degree to which the institution attempts to address

the causes of high drop, fail, withdrawal and incomplete rates for high enrollment courses.

- The following secondary research sources created by the Office of Institutional Research were used:
  - o Report of Retention Rates by Division, Department and by Course, Spring 2005
  - o Freshman Class Profile, Fall 2005
  - o Annual Enrollment Report, September 2006 - Table 4, New Freshman Academic Performance
- A primary research source was created by Bob Reass, Instructor of Mathematics and Sage learning Math Specialist, to garner input from Academic Deans in October 2006.
- Table E-2 in the Foundations of Excellence Current Practices Inventory was also utilized in this investigation.

Linda Brogan, Health Promotions Specialist, conducted interviews with the following MCC employees when reviewing student placement in appropriate courses:

- Cynthia VanSickle, English instructor and co-chair of honors program.
- Paulette Vrett, English instructor
- Marilyn Weniger, Director of Advising/Counseling
- Diane Terlep, Math Department Chair, co-sponsor Phi Theta Kappa

Jonathan Birnbaum, Dean of Library & Academic Support Services, interviewed the following members of the Student Life Department:

- Sue Ann Olson, Secretary, Dean of Students
- Helen Jost, Coordinator, Adult Recruitment
- Kellie J. Carper, Coordinator, High School Recruitment
- Sonia Reising, Coordinator, Multicultural Programs and Student Leadership
- Ralph P. Gardner, Coordinator of Student Life and Campus Activities

Interviews were also conducted with faculty members across campus.

#### **Recommended Grade: C+**

#### **Recommended Action Items:**

- Emphasis on engaging assignments through faculty driven meetings (*High priority*)
  - Emphasis on engaging assignments through faculty driven meetings (High priority)
    - o Continued emphasis is needed for faculty to design assignments that engage students (e.g. the NEA Higher Education Advocate suggests requiring a "product" as the result of reading assignment).
    - o One meeting a month should be devoted to academic matters as determined by faculty. Meetings could be held during division or department meeting times to give everyone the opportunity to attend workshops.
    - o We applaud the Professional Development Team for their current efforts in creating workshops that are directly applicable. Successful instructional methods used to increase student engagement should continue to be shared during fall and spring workshops and/or in sessions offered by Professional Development.
      - For example instructors can change the structure of assignments to increase student engagement. Instead of asking students simply to read the textbook, an instructor may ask students to write questions based on the assigned reading.
      - Sharing best practices is a non-threatening way to expose instructors to various pedagogical methods that may be used in their classes. Instructors should leave the workshop with materials they can immediately apply in their courses.
      - The "Five Minutes of Fame" should be expanded, and suggestions should be given for ways to adapt strategies to be used in various subject areas.
      - Examples of innovative teaching strategies should be shared during the workshops.
      - In order to increase student engagement, faculty members need to be encouraged to continuously reinforce the relevancy of courses. Sessions

should be held to share strategies to emphasize the link between courses and real life.

This recommendation is not intended to be an intrusion in a faculty member's academic freedom, creativity, or flexibility in teaching methods, rather this is an attempt to recognize strengths, encourage faculty to experiment with instructional methods--all with regard for providing a challenging and engaging learning experience for our students.

- MCC 101: more condensed format (*High priority*)
  - MCC 101: more condensed format (High priority)
    - o Although MCC 101 is currently offered during the summer session, it could be offered in a one week condensed format prior to the fall semester in order to reach students prior to their first class. This has been done in the past with low enrollment, so perhaps more could be done to increase new students awareness of summer course offerings
    - o Instead of focusing on the first year, it would be beneficial to focus on students' first semester. The first year constitutes 50 percent of students' time at MCC. If a student is not exposed to the established common learning goals until the second semester, it may be too late to ensure success for first-year students.
  
- Encouragement of Mid-term grades (*High priority*)
  - Encouragement of Mid-term grades (High priority)
    - o Deans or Department Chairs can encourage faculty members to provide mid-term reports to students.
    - o Students should be made aware of their grade at mid-term. (High priority)
    - o Early feedback of progress from instructors can alert students of the need to seek additional help with course material.
  
- Increased student visibility and perception change of Sage Learning Center (*High priority*)
  - Increased student visibility and perception change of Sage Learning Center (High priority)
    - o Faculty can encourage all students to take advantage of Sage Learning Center through classroom visits, information on the syllabus, posters in the classroom, etc.
    - o Efforts are currently underway by those involved with The Sage Learning Center to increase the awareness and to reinforce an accurate understanding of those who may take advantage of the services offered by the SLC.
  
- Increased emphasis on the importance of Placement tests (*High priority*)
 

More needs to be done to investigate ways to communicate the importance of placement tests. Currently students receive letters about placement tests, and recruiters stress the importance to high school guidance counselors.
  
- Reduce credit hours needed to meet one-on-one with counselor (*High priority*)
 

To increase the success of students who are struggling early in their college career, students should be required to meet one-on-one with a counselor if their GPA is below a 2.0 after 12 credit hours rather than 24 credit hours. Action is already being taken to make this change.
  
- Automated Degree Audit (*High priority*)
 

The information regarding degree requirements for certificate and transfer students needs to be revised for easier use and should be readily available to students. Consider implementing decision-making software to assist with scheduling, which would be especially helpful to part-time students who are not required to meet with advisors.
  
- Easier student access to faculty contact information, adjunct faculty should use MCC e-mail (*High priority*)
 

Increased communication is needed between students and faculty members. Students need easy access to instructor contact information (e.g. adjunct faculty members should be required to use an MCC e-mail address).
  
- Increase faculty visibility of Sage Learning Center (*High priority*)

- Faculty awareness of the Sage Learning Center can be increased through visits to the center.
  - o These visits could take place in groups during existing meetings (e.g. division/department, or faculty/staff days).

- Assistance with transition from high school to college (*High priority*)

Students need more opportunities to receive help with the transition from high school to college. MCC 101 covers several essential topics, but additional programs could be offered to help students "learn how to learn." Example topic areas that could increase student success are reading for meaning, ways to enhance memory, and organization.

- Student Life Assessment (*Medium priority*)

In order to further increase the effectiveness of extracurricular activities offered on campus, additional assessment tools could be implemented to evaluate student learning through these activities.

- Sharing of CCSSE results (*Medium priority*)

Results of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, CCSSE, should be shared with the college community to help everyone understand why students withdraw from school.

- Sharing of retention committee findings (*Medium priority*)

It would be helpful for the retention committee to share its findings.

- Course information available prior to registration (*Medium priority*)

o Prior to registering for classes, students could be encouraged to meet with the instructors of the courses for which they may enroll. Advisors could promote the need for students to visit faculty members. Faculty office numbers could be made more readily available.

o The NEA Higher Education Advocate supports student interaction outside of the classroom by informing "research clearly indicates that personal contact with instructors outside class correlate strongly with student satisfaction, higher academic achievement, and persistence in college" (7).

- Increased communication between Student Life and faculty members (*Medium priority*)

o Members of the Student Life Department could attend faculty department meetings to inform faculty on available activities that relate to course material.

o In addition, faculty could suggest activities that would work closely with their courses. A list of past activities should be distributed prior to or during the meeting to spark ideas of possible activities.

- For example, if a faculty member has students attend the film festival, the faculty member may give suggestions for the film selection to better support the class.

- Meeting with faculty members may also increase the awareness of what faculty members are currently doing to encourage student participation in extracurricular activities.

- Human intervention prior to withdrawal (*Low priority*)

CAPC can consider whether or not human intervention prior to dropping a course is beneficial to students. Before dropping a course, students may be required to meet with a person to explain the reason for the drop or withdrawal. This may help students who may still succeed in the course if directed to the appropriate area for assistance.