Building Communication for Student Success
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Broad Themes:
- Improving Organizational Communication
- Defining Learning Outcomes
- Reviewing the Structure of the Gateway Project
- Student Retention

At Hillsborough Community College, we have the Gateway Project as our QEP that focuses on student retention, we have the need to define student learning outcomes, and we have the need to communicate better. I’m going to address these themes this morning in our brief time together and I hope there will be a few minutes left over for questions at the end.

At the outset, let me say that the Gateway Project is a particularly rigorous exemplar of a faculty-driven and well-designed QEP, and something about which everyone here should take justifiable pride. This is a QEP that gets it right.

Organizational Communication
I’d like to start with a focus on organizational communication. When we think of communication, let’s picture of a two-way street with multiple modes of travel, maybe like a surface street with a monorail overhead or a trolley if we’re in Ibor City. On the sending end of the street, we first design the communication. The design end is critical and I’m going to return to that in a few minutes. We then send out communication, verbally, non-verbally, in written form, and in graphic/pictorial format. On the receiving end of the street, we perceive and interpret the information received. But do we know how much of that communication was received and how it was understood and interpreted? There are so many ways for communication to become derailed, missed – or in the case of non-verbal communication, passed on without the sender’s conscious knowledge!
Preparing for this in-service, my colleague Paul Nagy shared with me some results for the internal faculty and staff surveys conducted here at HCC. Looking over the results of the closed-ended questions, I note that communication jumps out as an issue. In reading the open-ended comments, I noted that there are various aspects of organization and communication that jump out and clamor for attention. That brings me to my first big theme today:

**Viewing the College as an open system, communication is both a process and an outcome, mediated by organizational constraints and facilitators.**

We just saw a very basic process diagram of communication, but now I’d like to set that aside and talk about communication as an outcome, a desired state or goal to achieve. When we say we want to improve organizational communication, lots of times in colleges and universities we focus on the outcome – improved communication -- but we don’t focus on how the current situation came to be the way it is, and in particular on what structural and cultural factors are at play. Yes folks, I’m saying that lots of time we put the cart before the horse. That’s a guaranteed recipe for going nowhere fast.

**Structural Determinants of Communication**

So let’s ask ourselves, what structural aspects of the college play a role in helping or hindering communication? For me, a few spring to mind right away.

**Physical Location**

First is the physical organization of the college. In this case, HCC is a multi-campus institution. Each of those campuses is in a different location, each campus has a slightly different program mix, and each campus responds to and reflects the community within which it operates – and let’s remember that one of our great strengths as community colleges has always been sticking close to the community. On the other hand, we’re more spread out than if we were a single-campus institution. I don’t know about you, but my voice only carries so far. The further away we are from each other, the harder it is to hear one another. So the geographically dispersed nature of our institution is a factor that plays against good communication.
**Structural Organization and Disciplinary Groupings**

It has been observed many times in the higher education literature that we tend to erect silos around our disciplines and our organizational functions. We think in terms of our disciplines or our functions, and communicate accordingly. Accountants design systems for accountants, and it’s a natural tendency. Many of us think in terms of peer reference groups – what are our colleagues in Sociology or Homeland Security Studies doing at other institutions? Budget models that force each program area to pull its weight in terms of student FTE can facilitate such thinking, since folks tend to chase after a bigger slice of the pie than they may have at the moment, sometimes to the detriment of other units on campus.

**Centralization versus Decentralization**

Yet another structural factor is the degree to which an institution operates in a centralized versus decentralized manner. Centralized institutions will tend to have uniform policies, procedures, budget development processes, accounting systems, etc. across and within campuses. Decentralized institutions will tend to exhibit more variety in their approach to operations. The question to resolve here is this: at what level of organizational centralization/decentralization can we optimize communication, other things being equal?

**Cultural Determinants of Communication**

In addition to the role in communication played by the structural aspects of a college, cultural aspects play as big a role if not bigger. I sure don't have an exhaustive list of those factors, but here are a few that I've seen come up in your faculty and staff survey:

**Goal Clarity**

The Rolling Stones observed almost 40 years ago that “you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime you might get what you need.” (Jagger and Richards, 1968). To me, that speaks directly to goal clarify. If we don’t know what we want, we won’t have a chance of even getting to what we need. Getting to goal clarify is a huge undertaking in any organization, and managing the organizational culture to move the college ahead in a relatively unified direction is a mark of good leadership.
Most institutions with which I’ve worked and consulted find that they can aid alignment and communication by developing a shared sense of mission, vision and undergirding values as part of the strategic planning process. Here’s our mission, vision and values at SCAD, for example: simple, direct, and easy to understand. We just developed this as part of our new, broad-based strategic planning process.

Now, the question may come up: who was involved in this process? What does “broad-based” mean? In our case, we involved staff and faculty, administrators, and students in a representative input-gathering process. We focused on running focus groups with informal opinion leaders, people in front-line leadership positions, faculty, students, advisory board members, etc. Synthesizing all that input took a lot of time and effort, but the result is that we have a clear set of major goals and strategies for the institution that are based on a shared understanding.

What can this do for us? So the task now is to communicate that sense of direction and priorities for the institution. How do we do that? Knowing where the institution is headed, a sense of how we can play a role in achieving those strategic goals, and having an ongoing sense of the progress achieved are all very motivating elements of organizational communication. But if people don’t know about the mission, vision, values, and goals and don’t feel like their voice or effort matters, then it’s just the opposite – alienating, demotivating, and demoralizing. Most of us have been there at some point in the past, and we don’t need to go backwards. I can tell you this: Time and again, external reviewers are amazed that everyone they talk to at SCAD can recite the college mission statement, and know what it means: to enable students to succeed in professional careers. So now let’s look at the HCC mission statement.

**Mission and QEP Goals**

Hillsborough Community College, a public, comprehensive institution of higher education, empowers students to excel through its superior teaching and service in an innovative learning environment.

This is a good, succinct mission statement. Students are at the center: empowering them to excel is the core purpose. At a more granular level, HCC went through a very
interactive development process in developing its Gateway Project QEP. Completely in line with the college mission, the QEP developed at HCC has as its chief goals the following:

**QEP Goal I:** To achieve demonstrable student learning gains in identified gateway college-level knowledge, skills and abilities.

**QEP Goal II:** To increase the student success rate in subsequent program work through demonstrable student learning gains in identified gateway college-level knowledge, skills and abilities utilized in those courses.

So we want students to not only succeed in the gateway courses. Then we want to see that those same students succeed in subsequent courses where gateway college-level knowledge, skills and abilities are used, and to be able to demonstrate how they use those gateway skills to achieve success. I’ve seen a lot of Quality Enhancement Plans in my work as a consultant. The HCC QEP in my opinion has the advantages of a simple, clear focus; a purpose totally appropriate to community college education; and an implementation that relies on faculty developing and owning a sense of what's important for students to learn. Let's move now from goal clarity to role clarity, another cultural determinant of organizational communication.

**Role Clarity**

What is the nature of our contract with the college? Are we hired as solo practitioners and expected to function completely as solo practitioners? Are there greater dimensions that form part of the expectations for faculty at Hillsborough Community College? At what level should we expect to engage with the institution? When faculty are as engaged as I’ve seen here on my previous visits, I see the larger, more collective community of reflective practice emerging that is really what I’d call the hope of higher education. It’s just people working together on a common problem, using information on student learning to reflect and figure out what strategies are working the best, and diffusing good teaching and learning practice around the college. Sometimes simple ideas are the most revolutionary. The QEP expands the notion of our role to one of a community of reflective practitioners.
Jon Wergin (2003) talks about the motivators for faculty. He lists four prime motivators: autonomy, the freedom to contribute to the common good; community, the opportunity to be a vital part of a group of scholars, recognition, or public validation, and efficacy, the sense that what we do matters. When we think about something as powerful and meaningful as the Gateway Project, it has a number of these motivators built in. Faculty have the collective autonomy to define what is important about student learning, where it should occur, how it may be taught, and how the impact of those collective decisions may be measured. I’ve seen the work faculty groups have done as communities of practice to define what the gateway competencies mean in terms of their specific disciplines. The impact of the project will become increasingly apparent as we get into further expansion of the gateway courses and watching students succeed who previously may have been cooled out or discouraged from further coursework by failure in an old gateway course. What I don’t see enough of yet (and admittedly I’m a visitor) is individual and collective recognition of the successes occurring. Peer recognition is the stuff meaning is made of to me. Organizational rituals that honor faculty efforts and successes are important. Let’s celebrate those successes. You really have something special here.

**The Language we Speak**

We all use the linguistic conventions within our discipline (for example, when speaking with Engineering audiences I talk about the Delta between time 1 and time 2; with psychologists I speak about pre-test post-test differences). Some time ago, Bergquist (1992) identified four cultures of the academy: collegial, managerial, developmental, and negotiating – perhaps most relevant to us is the difference in linguistic conventions and cultural assumptions between collegial culture and managerial culture, such as finding meaning primarily in reference to academic disciplines on the one hand and finding meaning primarily in organizing, implementing and evaluating goal-directed work and purposes on the other. Further complicating the communication issue from the disciplinary linguistic standpoint is the necessity of getting to a shared understanding of accreditation language. I call that “iceberg language” since the subtext of any given SACS standard needs to be understood at least as thoroughly as the requirement itself. So there are many opportunities for linguistic misunderstandings!

**Defining Learning Outcomes**
Expectations for Student Learning: A Shared Language

I have a question for you. What would happen if we had a way of discussing what we do in the community college in a way that spanned boundaries and was understandable to faculty, to administrators, to students, to advisory boards, and to members of the public? What if we had a way of discussing what we do in a way that helped us communicate and coordinate our efforts within and between departments? What if we had a way of communicating the progress our students are showing -- in a way that all parties could understand?

The fact is that we already do. We can talk about student learning outcomes, or from a faculty standpoint, Faculty Expectations for Student Learning. Here’s how Harvey Perlman, the now retired Chancellor of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, puts the case:

“The shift to student learning poses many questions:

- Can we change the structure of higher education so it measures students’ progress by their learning achievements rather than by how long they sit in a classroom?
- Is our curriculum structured and coordinated in such a way that facilitates interdisciplinary thinking?
- Can we allocate the valuable time of faculty toward those students who might benefit the most from faculty attention?
- Can we more fully exploit technology to enhance student learning at less cost?”

“The answers to all of these questions are much easier if we focus on learning outcomes.”

-Harvey Perlman, Chancellor, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (2004).

Let’s keep this in mind. These are all tough questions. Our goal is to build communication for student success. Let’s talk more specifically about how that applies to the Gateway Project at HCC.

The Gateway Project at HCC
Building a shared language and understanding through a focus on student competencies

One of the reasons I’m so excited about the Gateway Project is that it has put into operation a growth spiral for the faculty, for the students, for the college, and thus for the community. We have clear, shared goals. Through the project, faculty have become engaged in a meaningful dialogue about what is important for students to learn and how to define and measure that in the context of specific disciplinary coursework through a process of mapping.

Extending the Mapping Process for Key KSAs

A shared language has developed: that of the knowledge, skills and abilities we expect students to master. We decided to focus first on the development of a core set of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) and to put those together in a chart. Then clusters of HCC faculty, with support from the QEP steering committee, worked to map those KSAs to various gateway courses. I saw those chart and worked with Psychology and Math faculty on the specific course mapping process last time I was here. This process of mapping KSAs to specific disciplinary and course content is where we have seen the rise of increased cross-disciplinary communication. Let me expand on that a bit.

Building communication within and between departments: Operationalizing faculty expectations for student learning

Let’s take as an example one of the skills sets normally thought of as being included as part of critical thinking. What is clear is that what I mean by problem-solving in engineering technology and what I mean by problem-solving in nursing are two very different things. Or are they? The engineering design process begins with a problem statement, perhaps broadly defined, and then seeks to establish boundary parameters around the problem. Nurses use patient assessment tools to establish the parameters of a problem. Both disciplines use a process of developing, testing, and refining solutions to arrive at a useful design or problem resolution. Thus, when we get together to discuss next steps in the Gateway Project, it’s important to remember that we’re focusing on a fundamental aspect of critical thinking, the ability to solve problems. We define and operationalize it a little differently from one discipline to the next, and thus we look to measure it somewhat differently. But when we focus on the evidence to support
our judgment on the extent to which the students have acquired problem-solving skills, we’re talking about the outcomes, and that’s our common lingua franca.

Building communication with our students:
Do students understand what they are expected to master?
Up until this point we have not even begun to introduce those whom we serve and in whose lives we strive to facilitate positive change and economic empowerment – our students! They too have linguistic conventions. My colleague Terri Manning, Associate VP at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, does a wonderful presentation on millennials – their expectations, their communication norms, etc. A baby boomer like me sounds archaic to millennial ears unless I learn those cultural norms of communication they share. Dr. Manning and her colleagues (2007) note that millennials:

- need to understand why they are doing what they are doing – objectives of classroom activities and projects.
- want to have input into their educational processes.
- want to be involved in meaningful activities, not mundane work.
- think it is cool to be smart.
- will respond well to programs like “learning communities and service learning.”
- are likely to appreciate clear expectations, explicit syllabi, and well structured assignments.
- expect detailed instructions and guidelines for completing assignments.
- want to know what will be covered on tests and what exactly must be done to earn an “A” and
- because of their high expectations of themselves, students may become demoralized by earning a B or C in college.

Interesting to note is that millennials get quick feedback from computer applications, and use that to guide further actions. There is no way I’m going to react as quickly as a computer, but the strength of the expectation for feedback is worth noting.

Now, here’s the kicker: If students don’t feel they understand the language being used, don’t feel they know what’s expected, and don’t get solid, timely feedback on their work
so they understand their progress based on a set of shared standards, can we reasonably expect that they will be optimally motivated to stay the course and complete their programs of study?

Again, the shared language of focusing on expectations for student learning and the acquisition of key knowledge, skills and abilities comes to the rescue. It gives us a common language. There are ways we can refine that language, and I’ll return to that thought.

But to summarize so far, the Gateway Project has given us clear, succinct goals; a purpose for coming together and a problem to solve; a situation that includes important motivators for faculty; and a way to communicate within and across departments, between faculty and administration, and between faculty and students.

**Building Student Retention**

I began this discussion by noting that communication is both a process and an outcome, mediated by organizational constraints and facilitators. With that in mind, let’s focus for a few moments on retention. What is retention? Usually, we think of term-to-term retention and year-to-year retention: the proportion of students either graduating or returning to continue their studies in an institution. It’s an *institution-centric* definition of success. While this is an important policy goal, I think that understanding the economic impact the college is having on the lives of its students in terms of improved employment and income is also very important. We used to call this “early leavers with marketable skills” when I worked in community colleges in North Carolina. The economic impact on the students involves a *student-centric* definition of success. I understand that HCC was recently in the news as having the next to lowest graduation rate in the State. I wonder how many of those who left early met their educational goals – regardless of our institutional goals – and thus did not continue their programs of study. Adjusting retention figures to account for those who left early but achieved improved economic outcomes would I suspect dramatically improve the retention picture for us. But this is not easy information to get. We have a required exit interview at SCAD for students who are leaving before graduation, and we’re able to pull in a lot of useful information about student departure from that process. I just got the first dataset
from our revised early leaver exit interview process, and I’m really excited about seeing what implications for practice can be ferreted out of the results.

**No quick fixes within the mission of the community college**

The fact is, whether we like it or not, there are no quick fixes to retention in the community college setting. We enroll students who may not have learned how to learn, may lack study skills, and may not speak English as a first language. So, for a start, the student body we enroll may not be prone to completion in the same way as, for example, the student body at Duke University. But that’s just part of the problem.

**Retention as an outcome of organizational processes**

A larger part of the retention puzzle has to do with how we understand retention. It is not, as many policymakers think, a monolithic construct that can be directly acted upon. Far from it! Retention and graduation are outcomes, the **indirect but additive result** of a host of factors and processes. Unless we concentrate on understanding those casual factors and organizational processes and design interventions accordingly, we are not likely to see improved retention and graduation rates.

Let me give you an example. When I first got to Georgia Tech in 1998, we had an 85% first-year retention rate. Not bad, except that the incoming students had average SAT scores in the 1340 range and really far more should have persisted given the incoming academic ability. So we looked at what to do. We tried learning communities – that didn’t work in the GT environment. We finally hit upon using first-year seminars in the discipline, peer-to-peer counseling, and small group work in large lecture courses as viable ways of socializing students, helping them work through specific issues, and turning passive learning into active, engaged learning where students increasingly “got it.” The Institute now has a 93% first-year retention rate. That’s an eight-point improvement over a period of nine years, and we had to align both academic and co-curricular elements of the Institute to make it happen.

So here are my points about retention: It doesn’t happen overnight, it takes all parts of the college working together, the benefits are incremental, and we just have to keep looking at the results and talking it over as a community of practice to figure out what works and put it in place in our institutions.
What makes the Gateway Project so likely to succeed in the long run? First, we know there is an incremental and positive effect of aligning language, expectations, and organizational communication. There is an incremental and positive effect for aligning competencies and academic processes to introduce, reinforce, and facilitate student gains. You’ve already taken those steps. Next is the step of aligning organizational policies, procedures and processes, both academic, co-curricular and administrative, to optimize student gains. What we’re doing here reflects practices that we know from the literature are most likely to produce long-term, solid gains in student retention and graduation. So keep it up and keep moving forward!

Understanding student backgrounds and experiences at a more granular level and understanding student departure as a set of disparate behaviors: Bucket Theory
I’d like to do a quick side-bar as long as we’re discussing retention. My colleague Dr. Mike Crow at Savannah State University, a historically Black university, has developed what he calls “Bucket Theory,” (Crow, 2007), a formative response to minority students’ early departure. This theory, developed in his dissertation, incorporates understanding primary student cultures, individual student goals, and extramural stressors along with the usual institutional socialization and academic issues addressed by traditional practices. Key attributes of the “Bucket Theory” are development of a practical student typology (who are the students? What are their backgrounds?), disaggregating disparate departure behaviors (what are the various reasons they leave?), and a close inspection of influences from divergent sources upon the predicted probability of early departure by different types of students. Practical implications include adapting curriculum, pedagogy and institutional processes and services to meet the cultural norms of diverse students. This might include services and programs such as child care, women’s re-entry, transfer counselors, non-traditional scheduling and course delivery methods -- that take into account the diversity of adult responsibilities, diverse learning styles, etc. characterizing this diverse student body.

Faculty Role: What is our role in communicating for student success?
Let me wind up with a few practical suggestions for how we can facilitate communication, increase student engagement, and drive forward student success.
Teaching Practices that Facilitate Engagement and Retention

- **Clear understanding of evaluation standards for student work:** I said earlier that I’d return to the notion of designing effective communication. A big part of that is framing expectations. At SCAD, departments create and refine developmental rubrics that are used in various courses within each discrete discipline to understand, guide, assess, and give feedback on student learning. Most of us are very familiar with the concept of a rubric, but perhaps we’re not so familiar with the concept of developmental rubrics.

- **Developmental rubrics** are founded on the notion that there exists in most professional endeavors a set of competencies and an ascending level of expertise in those competencies, such that a person with expert knowledge has quick cognitive access to a wide variety of ways to think about a topic, solve a problem, or what have you. We use this in a basic sense to modify our course rubrics to reflect faculty expectations for ascending expertise at different points in the curricula, so students know not only what is expected but at what depth.

- **Clear expectations:** At SCAD, we have developed a set of cohesive curriculum maps, including program and course learning outcomes, levels of competency expected, and how student competency will be assessed. Using these curriculum maps together with our SCAD curriculum guidelines and mandated syllabi templates including learning outcomes, we are able to ensure a heightened continuity and consistency to our courses and each discrete discipline. This might only work in a general sense within a college transfer program at HCC, but might be very applicable in technical, vocational, certificate, continuing education, and focused industrial training programs.

- **Feedback and critique:** According to a meta-analysis I heard about recently, formative feedback on student performance (such as drafts of papers) improves performance about 2/3 of the time. Peer pressure and critique can also have a marked effect on student performance. We already noted how important feedback is to millennial students. To be useful, the critique and feedback has to be specific, timely, based on standards or competencies, and has to suggest ways to improve. These are essential elements of studio culture in art and design disciplines, but can certainly be adapted to other situations.

- **Leveraging technology:** Harvey Perlman, whom I quoted earlier, rhetorically asked if there are ways to increase student engagement and learning gains while
leveraging technology and cutting costs. One way of doing that is by using personal response systems, especially in large lecture classes, to engage students in small group discussion about an answer to a problem posed by the instructor. Personal response software instantly aggregates responses and displays the results, allowing students to get feedback right away – and allowing the instructor to see who is or is not catching on. I’ve seen this used in introductory Physics classes at Georgia Tech with very positive effect on student engagement and active group processing of the class content. Our time is running short, so let me summarize.

**Summary: Building communication for student success means:**

- Clearly communicating goals across the college
- Using a common language to communicate: framing discussions in terms of student learning
- Creating motivating and engaging opportunities for faculty to develop a community of practice
- Using data from measurement of student gains to engage in critical reflection on teaching practice, and adopting those successful teaching practices that facilitate student engagement, retention of material, and success through gateway courses and beyond.
- Aligning academic processes to facilitate student knowledge gains, success and retention
- Aligning college processes to facilitate student success and retention
- Acknowledging and honoring faculty successes in furthering student success under the Gateway Project to effect sustainability of the QEP and advances in teaching and learning.

Everyone at Hillsborough Community College has made a great start with this project, and this model has the potential to push good educational practice forward across the nation. Go for it!

**References**


