Institutional Effectiveness as Process and Practice in the American Community College

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The six regional accrediting agencies in the United States have created a set of standards based on best practices in colleges and universities. The evolving perception of an effective institution is one that uses data, assessment, and evaluation results to improve programs and services and strives for a high level of institutional quality. While the regional accrediting agencies require institutional effectiveness (IE) within colleges and universities, institutions need to recognize the value of IE in transforming institutional culture and focusing attention on student success and institutional improvement. Colleges that participate in IE as a function of compliance do not reap the benefits that colleges that use it as an institutional change agent do.

Institutional effectiveness is a term that has been around for more than twenty-five years, and although there are commonalities among the regional accrediting agencies, no single agreed-on definition exists. Some specifically define institutional effectiveness, while others address the processes and practices expected of colleges through the reaffirmation process. One common strand across all six agencies is the high proportion of colleges receiving recommendations in the institutional effectiveness areas (for example, assessment, program and learning outcomes, and general education competencies). Because this chapter’s focus is on the processes and practices typically included in institutional effectiveness, I define
institutional effectiveness as consisting of a set of ongoing and systematic institutional processes and practices that include planning, the evaluation of programs and services, the identification and measurement of outcomes across all institutional units (including learning outcomes in instructional programs), and the use of data and assessment results to inform decision making. All of these activities are accomplished with the purpose of improving programs and services and improving student success and institutional quality.

If there is one characteristic that is common among all six regional accrediting agencies, it is that the mandate for IE requires that colleges be purposeful in their planning. All six regional agencies require colleges to identify their predetermined outcomes for students and address ways all college units assist in creating an environment conducive to and in support of learning. To create an IE culture and atmosphere, one that permeates the institution (all people, processes, and practices), some key terms from the definition I have provided need further explanation:

- **Ongoing** means more than one rotation of a given process or practice. Colleges keep the momentum going from the previous accreditation site visit and do not attempt to gear up one year before the next one by running the entire college through some evaluative process so they can be ready for a visiting team. **Ongoing,** when addressing processes, means cyclical. When colleges view IE as a culturally transforming process that can be used for many purposes, faculty and administrators begin to rely on its ongoing nature.

- **Systematic** means that the institution defines and creates an organized IE system. Systems can typically be mapped out with a time line, an information flow, and an approval chain. IE systems are integrated and synergistic in nature.

- **Institutional** means common agreement across the institution that these processes are the institution's processes. Because of the politics within institutions, colleges can face minirevolutions within departments over the issues of learning outcomes assessment. Offshoots arise from one department or unit that can lead to many other offshoots, and soon colleges find themselves with a disconnected, unfocused set of initiatives that cannot be brought together with a central focus. Colleges should adopt consistent, inclusive, and effective processes and practices; agree on them across the institution; exempt no one; and disallow unsanctioned, disconnected attempts. Institutional effectiveness processes should be carried out as a single uniform institutional effort. The formation of an IE team or committee and an institutional IE plan can help keep this to a minimum.

- **Evaluation** implies answering several questions. “Did the program work the way we anticipated it would work?” “Did students accomplish what we expected them to accomplish [knowledge, behaviors, attitudes,
skills, and so forth[?]” “Did the administrative unit deliver what it claimed it would deliver?” Good evaluation assesses progress along the way, analyzes that progress, and informs programmatic direction, change, and improvement. It also measures the overall effectiveness of the program, course, or service. Evaluation is exact, well defined, and planned.

- **Outcomes** are benefits for the recipients. The recipients of courses, programs, and student services are students. The benefits students receive are increases in their knowledge and skills, changed attitudes and values, improved conditions and status, and increased opportunities. Student outcomes can be recognized immediately or throughout the life of a student. They can be measured at any point within a course, during a capstone course, at graduation, or at any point after the student leaves the college. Measuring student outcomes (learning, program, or institutional) takes time and resources, two things most institutions lack beyond one year after graduation. Multiple types of outcomes are assessed within colleges and universities. Some of these are mentioned by specific accrediting agencies and require further definitions:

  - **Learning outcomes** are changes observed or measured within students that result from the learning that takes place in the classroom or through classroom activities such as reading, homework assignments, and group projects. Learning outcomes can be general in nature, such as improving critical thinking skills, or specific to a discipline, such as nursing students’ improving their ability to take accurate blood pressure readings.

  - **Program outcomes** are benefits students receive as a result of the entire program of study. They are most easily defined by asking program faculty one question: “Are there any benefits program completers receive or gain that students who take only a few courses do not?” Typically program completion leads to passing licensure exams and better employment opportunities, but also to a deeper knowledge of the content field, commitment to lifelong learning, and greater satisfaction from working in the field. Complex concepts are often covered in multiple courses, and students cannot demonstrate mastery until their capstone course or comprehensive exam.

  - **Institutional outcomes** are benefits institutions want for all of their students regardless of major. These types of outcomes often relate to the general education core set of courses and the college-level competencies institutions want students to achieve. But institutional outcomes can be different based on the mission of the institution (for example, theological seminaries and religious schools) and the student body served.

  - **Administrative outcomes** are benefits to faculty, staff, or students due to the purpose and function of administrative units and support services. Departments and units can establish outcomes for themselves,
such as counseling wanting to recruit and hire a new bilingual counselor to expand services for students (the college would benefit from this inclusion). Campus security, for example, may desire that all college constituents feel safe while on campus, so security staff upgrade lighting and add safety and security training through professional development. When surveyed, faculty, staff, and students rate their perceptions of safety as very high. These types of outcomes are critical to IE and look at the effectiveness and efficiency of all areas of the college.

- **Using data to inform decision making** has received a lot of attention over the past few years as colleges and universities strive to create a “culture of evidence” at their institutions. This implies that administrators, faculty, and frontline staff make decisions based not on anecdotal information but on student success data, outcomes assessment results, and feedback to inform decision making. Units do not use anecdotal information to make decisions but instead request information from the institutional research (IR) office or information technology staff to determine college and student needs.

- **Improving student success and institutional quality** requires that an institution define “student success and quality” and create a set of benchmarks or measures to show improvement over time. This begins with a data-gathering phase when the college community is asked, “If we improve institutional quality, what would we observe?” and, “If we improve student learning and success, what can we measure?” Some typical indicators might be incremental increases in term-to-term retention, graduation and transfer rates, successful course completion, and credit hours completed.

**Reporting Structure for Institutional Effectiveness**

Most community colleges have an institutional research, planning and research, or IE unit, which is typically a one-person office with some administrative support. One study found that approximately 50 percent of community colleges had small IR offices, with one full-time or part-time person (Morest & Jenkins, 2007). When the mandate for assessing student learning outcomes came down from the accrediting agencies, the IR office found itself overwhelmed by the complexity of the task. Because the task was large and the staff small, many institutions developed a committee and process structure that helped colleges get the work done. Some IR or IE offices report directly to the president and others to the chief academic or administrative officer. Wherever the office reports, one thing is clear: IR or IE staff find themselves in the position of needing to motivate people who do not report to them and to do things they do not want to do and for no clear reward.
Processes for Institutional Effectiveness

Because IE is an institution-wide, integrated, and ongoing set of processes, forming an institutional effectiveness committee (IEC) is an effective way of ensuring participation and responsibility across the college (see Figure 2.1). Institutional research staff members often feel underpowered in regard to requiring assessment and evaluation participation from all college staff. But a well-formed IE committee, given the charge and complete support of the president, can garner greater participation from across the college. Institutional effectiveness committees can be large or small and can serve as the umbrella or oversight group for all work related to student learning outcomes, strategic planning, and program and unit review.

The IEC can be a powerful committee that includes carefully selected opinion leaders from across the college and takes on important functions. It can be responsible for the development of an outcome matrix for the institution to include institutional outcomes (learning for students and other issues such as professional development for faculty and staff). The committee can work alone or with the assistance of community forums, surveys, and focus groups. Committee members gather data on institutional quality indicators

**Figure 2.1. Responsibilities of the Institutional Effectiveness Committee**

**Cochairs: Faculty Member and IE Director**

1. Consists of heavy membership of faculty and frontline staff (general studies and program)
2. Includes representation from all support areas (for example, library, student services, administrative units, finance, human resources)
3. Forms multiple subcommittees responsible for pieces of IE
4. Committee meets quarterly to review the progress of subcommittees

**Tasks:**

To develop the outcome matrix and process for the institution
Oversight for evaluative and quality processes

**Strategic Planning**

Develops strategic plan and strategic goals
Formulates institutional outcomes or quality indicators

**Products**

The strategic plan
Periodic reports of progress

**Academic Program Review**

Develops program review model
Identifies course, learning, and program outcomes

**Products**

Academic program review
Includes course and program learning outcomes
Includes use of results for improvement

**Support Unit Review**

Develops administrative and student services unit review process
Determines how these units support learning

**Products**

Administrative and support review cycle and reviews
Links outcomes to learning
Includes use of results for improvement

**General Education Committee**

Develops core general education competencies
Develops assessment plan
Creates rubrics for core competencies

**Products**

Periodic general education reports
Indicates if students are meeting competencies
Includes use of results for improvement
and determine how administrative and student services units support learning. The IEC can facilitate the development of all college evaluative processes such as program and unit reviews, the assessment of general education competencies, and strategic planning. While the accrediting agencies see IE as consisting of planning, evaluation, and assessment, the strategic planning committee at some community colleges is the larger committee and the IEC is a subcommittee of strategic planning. Regardless of the title of the larger committee, subcommittees can be formed to accomplish several tasks at the college—for example:

- **The strategic planning committee** responsible for developing the strategic plan (with collegewide input and support), the strategic goals, and annual priorities; developing institutional quality indicators and outcomes; and measuring periodic progress toward the goals. Products delivered by the strategic planning committee would include the strategic plan, the strategic goals, benchmarks to periodically measure progress toward institutional outcomes or quality indicators, and annual priorities for the institution.

- **The academic or instructional program review committee** responsible for developing an evaluative process for academic programs and departments. This subcommittee would be responsible for developing the program review model for the institution and identifying course, learning, and program outcomes for each area (with the strong participation of program faculty). Products delivered by this subcommittee would include the academic program review model (including the identification, assessment methods, and results of outcomes assessment), the calendar and timeline (cycle), and the identified strategies for improvement or change as a result of the evaluative and assessment process.

- **Support unit review committee** (administrative and student services areas) responsible for developing the administrative and student services unit review process. This subcommittee would be responsible for identifying outcomes in all noninstructional areas (with the participation of staff in each area) and determining ways to link unit effectiveness to support of student learning. Products delivered would include the administrative and support services review process and cycle and the use of results to improve programs and services.

- **The general education committee** would contain faculty from the general education areas of the college and some program faculty to address expected outcomes from the general education core courses. This subcommittee would be responsible for creating a list of core general education competencies and a minimum standard students must obtain, assisting in the development of assessment tools and grading rubrics, and developing an effective cyclical process for measuring the competencies. The products delivered by this subcommittee would be periodic...
general education reports, faculty analysis of the results of assessment, and a plan for improving student success.

Colleges often find that in order to support IE processes, they have to focus some attention on assessment methods. Strategic planning committees may be mostly concerned with assessing institutional-level outcomes, a program review committee may be more concerned with program outcomes, and a general education committee may focus mostly on course-level learning outcomes. Regardless of the level of outcomes, good assessment techniques and products need to be delivered. The most important aspect of assessment is not that “we have done it” but that “we have used the results of it to inform action.” Colleges should consider some of the following:

- Classroom-based or embedded assessments allow faculty to start with what they are already doing or develop an assessment tool that supports learning in the classroom.
- Formative evaluation of teaching (mostly of interest to new faculty) is gaining attention as a way to assess progress on learning outcomes over the term rather than the summative tools most institutions collect after the term is over, too late for faculty to address identified student issues.
- Student surveys (national or home grown) ask questions related to attitudes and behaviors of students (not self-assessments of how much they have learned).
- Qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, or SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analyses can accumulate important data to determine program direction and barriers to student success.
- Benchmarking (internally against the college's previous performance or against an external group of colleges) provides colleges with important comparative information.
- Faculty-staff surveys allow administrative units to ask outcome-based questions to determine the attainment of administrative outcomes.

The Cyclical Nature of Institutional Effectiveness

Because IE processes and activities are carried out with the purpose of improving programs and services and increasing student success and institutional quality, they are cyclical in nature. Assessments and evaluations are completed and analyzed, and then strategies for change are implemented. Because implementing improvement strategies and then observing change takes time, programs are reevaluated every few years (the average time between reviews is two to five years). The nature and timing of the cycle can be different based on the size and program composition of the college. Larger institutions may have over one hundred programs or units that
participate in program review, and their students may complete programs on average in four to six years. Putting programs on a five-year revolving cycle may therefore be best for that institution. Institutions that have participated in program review for multiple cycles are able to observe changes and improvements over time. A key to an effective cycle is giving the programs or units adequate time to reflect, make changes, and see the impact of those changes. Some colleges require an annual follow-up to program or unit review until the program reenters the cycle. Creating a cycle where one group of programs or units is reviewed every year on a revolving three- to five-year cycle keeps the college continuously involved in institutional improvement.

Getting Started with Institutional Effectiveness at Community Colleges

While colleges in many regions of the country have been working with IE process and practices for decades, other are new to the process. Colleges often feel overwhelmed by the comprehensive and inclusive nature of IE and have trouble getting started. Colleges can consider the following steps when beginning this important and institution-changing work:

1. Communicate the purpose of IE to the college community. Faculty and staff need to know not only the importance of IE for accreditation but also as a way to focus energy and attention on student learning and institutional improvement.
2. Provide professional development on the concepts of IE, defining and assessing student learning outcomes, and using results to improve institutional quality. This ensures that all faculty and staff have a common knowledge and vocabulary as they begin the work.
3. Obtain open and strong administrative support for institutional improvement. This often involves staff time and funding to support the processes.
4. Seek broad engagement in the development of evaluative processes and practices. Get as much faculty and frontline staff participation as possible to gain support and ownership of the processes. This should not be a top-down process driven by administrative agendas.
5. If faculty and staff are expected to use results to improve programs and services, administrators need to read and respond to the reviews and evaluations in an honest and supportive way. If resources are needed to improve or expand programs, administrators must be committed to supporting the recommendations with needed resources. Otherwise faculty will recognize IE as just one more academic exercise that results in faculty work and no result.
6. Put the time and resources needed into tracking processes. “The devil is in the details” is never truer than with IE. Once the faculty have defined
outcomes and created the assessment process, the difficult work begins. Questions arise that must be answered, or progress can slow to a crawl or be destroyed altogether. When are assessments delivered? Who collects them? Who scores them? Where do we send the results? What do we do with all the data? Create a flowchart for each process with time lines that help keep people on track.

**Conclusion**

When a college creates an IE model and set of practices that fit and support its culture and priorities, transformation can occur. Because community colleges are active places with overworked faculty and staff, the tendency of faculty and staff is often to look at what a similar institution is doing and replicate it. But colleges should create processes and practices around the priorities and needs of their own students, staff, community, and state and regional mandates. Institutional effectiveness is a way colleges keep their finger on the pulse of student needs and their eye on institutional quality. Time spent on developing useful and meaningful processes and practices will have great payoff in the end.

**Reference**
