

ADVANCEMENT SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

**Northland Pioneer College
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FOR

**The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools**

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I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Northland Pioneer College is a vital education institution in Northeast Arizona. The College's service to very poor counties is to be commended. The combined economic situation of the state, country and poor counties has not paralyzed the college, but rather seen as just another challenge. You still offer various forms of tuition and book vouchers for students, always putting the student at the center of the institution.

The decentralized nature of the college makes it very responsive to the communities that it serves. The incorporation of technology in delivery of the courses/programs makes them viable to learners in remote areas. The dedication of the faculty and staff to travel makes this model the college has designed effective to students.

The many challenges to NPC necessitate a coordinated approach to planning. The current economic downturn cannot overtake planning at the college, even though the finances are not there to look forward. The college must look to the future to further position the college for growth. Institutional research is in its beginning stages for the college to move into a data driven institution. It must identify what data is needed, how to extract the data, and then finally learn how to use it to make decisions.

II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

A. Student Success

As noted in conversations with the Steering Committee and with center staff, NPC does not have a comprehensive orientation or college skills development option for students. The absence of these opportunities causes a lack of understanding on the part of students in terms of financial aid applications, college policies, college admission requirements and other thing of importance to the student. In terms of college skills, students may leave the protection of their small classes and instructional venues without the personal management skills to deal with budget, career planning, and so forth. The addition of these options as course(s) or workshop(s) for students could provide information needed information prior to beginning their college career. A simple implementation plan for pre-enrollment group orientation days, supported through a college wide effort with faculty and staff, could benefit enrollment and retention, as well as success when students transfer to continue degree programs. The potential benefit would be significant, especially to first generation and returning adult students who may not clearly understand a college culture and learning expectations.

Dual enrollment has many benefits for high school students in that the opportunity provides a college experience with a nurturing high school oversight. However, to ensure the experience is college level, faculty need to have opportunities to interact and to be evaluated by college professionals who understand the differences in levels of competency and learner development. NPC needs to make a commitment to dual enrollment oversight that can work to ensure a consistent college experience for interested high school students. One suggestion provided through group interviews discussed the option of a new position in the north and one in the south areas with the responsibility to coordinate and evaluate instruction on site. These positions could help to ensure consistency and quality across the curriculum. With funding being as

tight as it is currently that may not be a possibility. However, adapting this recommendation to meet some of the suggestions would improve consistent learning for students.

B. Institutional Research—Data Driven Decision Making

Lack of data to guide decision making processes is a significant concern, and clearly, the college recognizes this need and has begun to address data collection and data use procedures. In conversations with administration and faculty, data included in the self study was not inclusive as Career and Technical Education faculty credentials were not included in the self study report. There is no institutional database that would allow for degree assessment, especially with adjunct faculty. These issues are examples of the lack of trustworthy data, and college personnel are working to correct this. The goal to have quality data for decision making purposes must be maintained if future growth and quality assessments are to be realized.

The college has requested consultation on the development of an institutional effectiveness model of institutional research. The college is well positioned to achieve this goal, having strong leadership commitment, good software and support, and the personnel skilled in designing, creating, managing, and interrogating databases. While far more detailed and extensive information is available from several sources, particularly the Association for Institutional Research (www.airweb.org), the team is pleased to provide some suggestions.

Any task analysis for the design of an IE model begins with the selection of outcomes. Typically, the college will want to examine its mission and purposes, and define measurable outcomes which will answer the question “How well are we doing what we claim to be doing?” NPC is well positioned with a clear mission statement and clearly itemized purposes, each of which can easily be represented by two or three measures.

The definition of data elements requires some careful forethought. As an example, success in preparing students for transfer could be defined as the number of students who transfer each year, or the number who transfer without losing credits, or the number who transfer to their first choice institution. The problem with these measures is that they do not provide stable bases for trend analysis. The college will be well advised to use rate measures, e.g. the percentage of students who elected transfer as a goal who did transfer successfully (further defined as transfer of a percentage of credits).

As the college pursues a data-driven decision-making model, it will also need to develop a culture of evidence. This is much more than the presentation of data which appear to support a particular decision or plan of action. It also involves regular monitoring of key variables (most colleges call them indicators) and the analysis of trends in these variables. It is important to avoid overreaction to what appear major changes. For example, when distance education was new, it was not unusual to see annual growth rates of several hundred percent in enrollments in distance education courses. This did not mean that distance education was growing faster than the overall college enrollment; it was a reflection of the small numbers of students enrolled the prior year(s); in other words, beware the small denominators!

Just as NPC has learned in the area of assessment of student learning, the development of a culture of evidence requires widespread acceptance and pursuit of involvement of college members at all levels. NPC will want to involve as many people as possible in the definition of measures (outcomes) which will reflect success of its purposes.

There are several links between IE and assessment. Many colleges make aggregate assessment data one or more of the elements in their IE reports. For example, the number of courses or programs assessed and/or updated (modified) in the past year, or comparisons of NPC students with regional or national norms on standardized measures. While assessment of student learning is still the province of faculty and still focused on improved learning and teaching, the aggregate results of assessment, particularly of incoming and former students, is part of IE.

This becomes particularly true in measures which reflect efficiency. For example, if NPC chooses to monitor the unit cost of instruction (per FTE student, perhaps), and also monitors the percentage of incoming students who are deficient in reading, writing, and mathematics, the college will likely find that as the percentage of students requiring remediation (TLC) increases, the unit cost of instruction will also increase. By the same token, examination of the percentage of students requiring remediation and the retention rate of students fall to winter will show a clear relationship, almost always inverse (negative correlation). These observations can only be trusted when there are inferential assurances of statistical significance. In some cases, non-parametric statistics will have to be used, due to small numbers of students in some categories or too few years of measures or incomplete data sets. Indeed, for the first few years any trends observed must be considered tentative. If the college wants to educate large numbers of faculty and staff to understand these issues without teaching/reviewing elementary statistics, a reasonable option is found in the quality initiative area (run charts, p charts, etc.) where trends and control limits, as well as special causes, can be understood without mathematical sophistication (or pain?). Whichever course the college chooses to pursue, much patience will be required while a requisite number of years of data collection permit reasonable trend analysis. In the meantime, just as with the monitoring and reporting of progress on the strategic plan, sharing and reporting on elements of institutional effectiveness will encourage wider participation and pride in the work of the institution.

While assessment of student learning focuses on direct measures, IE often blends many indirect measures into the mix. For example, non-returning students who did not complete a program of study could be surveyed to discover the percentage who achieved their goals. Many colleges are pleasantly surprised to find this indicator in the high 80s and 90s. In general, measures of student satisfaction are part of IE, but not part of assessment (student satisfaction is not a course of program learning outcome). Similarly, students in some programs take exams which constitute external validation (concurrent or predictive validity), such as in the health occupations. While the rate of successful completion of such exams is often a measure of assessment at the program level, it is also a measure of IE, as is the rate of employment of graduates (by program or other category, as defined by the college).

The college is cautioned in this effort on several points:

- A common experience is to decide to measure and record every conceivable data element, and then to run every possible cross-tabulation analysis to discover significant relationships. This effort is guaranteed to produce two outcomes: spurious significant outcomes (as Student discovered while developing his famous t-test), and feelings of being overwhelmed and drowning in data. It is better to define the outcomes and measures *a priori*.
- Responsibility for the integrity of the database and the consistency of inquiry language should be assigned specifically. While committees can work well to define priorities for data analysis outside the requisite reports, assigning one position the ultimate authority for the definition of variables will result in far more integrity in both the database and informational reports.
- Many colleges fail to assign sufficient professional staff to the IE function. Inasmuch as this area of responsibility is integral to institutional planning, it is a critical function of the college. As NPC advances this initiative, it may find it necessary to add human resources. For the immediate effort, however, the team was pleased to find that the IR personnel, while already heavily tasked, have sufficient talent and expertise to achieve the transition.
- Many colleges simply adopt a “best practice”, numerous examples of which are available from regional or national organizations. While this gives a rapid start, it precludes shared ownership in the effort. NPC is encouraged to examine and adapt, rather than adopt, existing models. After all, NPC is a unique college and will need an IE model appropriate to its character.

Ultimately, a major benefit of an IE model is the invitation to design and conduct experiments. A new approach to achieving a college objective can be compared to the existing model (pilot testing), and accurate comparisons (including of course tests for the statistical significance of any differences found) can be made. The college is reminded of the Hawthorn Effect: any new initiative will demonstrate initial improvement in outcomes as an effect of the novelty of the effort. As demonstrated originally at the Hawthorn plant, any change in the environment improved production on the line. Accordingly, data analysis should occur over several semesters and if possible some counterbalancing of personnel assignments should be involved to avoid the irreproducible results due to champions. Faculty members who teach experimental design can be most helpful in creating designs which avoid some of these problems, including demand characteristics and other forms of unintended bias. As these experiments are reported, they also provide “real-world” examples of the important concepts students learn, often in the abstract.

Reporting and disseminating the results of IE work can be very beneficial to the college. Of course reports can be tailored for different groups of stakeholders. Clearly, the present leadership of the college is expert in communications and internal stakeholders are well-informed. As IE reports are shared with external stakeholders, increased pride in the college is to be expected.

As an organization, NPC is well positioned and ready for the development of an IE model for IR. While this will be a major initiative, and will undoubtedly require additional resources to bring it to fruition, the college has the talent and expertise to begin. The team commends the college for this initiative, and fully expects a successful outcome.

A major benefit of data-driven decision-making is consensus and understanding about major changes, including the decision to discontinue a program of study. For example, the recent discontinuation of a program has created some dissension on campus. Using data from enrollments and from program reviews, employment trends, and employment outlooks, the college may want to develop a protocol for making such decisions. Developing benchmarks for individual programs may help in making these difficult decision.

C. Technology

The student portal provides an excellent opportunity for faculty to provide course information and grade feedback to students on a regular and timely basis, yet many faculty have chosen to not use the product. Professional development opportunities to learn the system are present; however, they may not be available to a decentralized faculty. Because of technological concerns from the past, some faculty may be reluctant to invest time in learning the system; however, the inconsistency in terms of student access and feedback to the same levels of information across course sections is a concern. A more significant effort in terms of professional development and training needs to be mounted to correct this disparity.

NPC has identified course scheduling as an issue and is working to provide alternatives through distance learning and hybrid course plans; however, interview feedback from several venues noted concerns related to scheduling and course options for students, especially those pursuing career and technical degrees.

NPC has many online courses and sought advice from the visiting team concerning the expansion of online learning. Given that online education is increasing in popularity nationally due to convenience and cost, it would be prudent for the College to seriously engage in increased online learning. Given the need for specific course work to be developed, the team offers multiple ideas to engage in this exciting opportunity for Northland Pioneer College.

Foremost, consult the current Higher Learning Commission Handbook concerning proposed changes (7.21). While this section deals with proposed changes such as online degrees (something beyond ICC's wish to simply expand online offerings), the information in the handbook will provide guidance as the institution contemplates a comprehensive plan to initiate increased online course offerings. Additionally, NPC should consult the HLC's website and closely read the Commission's statements on (http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=80&Itemid=236) online learning.

Most faculty at the college have embraced alternative delivery of courses. In order to maintain and expand the core of faculty involved in online teaching, Northland should develop a process to train additional faculty leaders to mentor online teachers, which will ensure continuity in assistance for faculty members as they develop new courses. The College may also want to consider additional training for both new and experienced faculty to keep up to date on the newest technology used to deliver online instruction. Faculty discussed with the team that they are designing internal workshops for faculty improvement; online teaching could be a topic for workshops.

The accreditation team did not find a procedure manual for the development and delivery of online courses at NPC that addressed all online issues, including balancing online and face-to-face sections, any special assessment need for online courses, online advising and student support, online 'best practices' groups for faculty, recommended class sizes for online courses, or processes for determining how online course delivery is monitored for quality. If this handbook does not yet exist, it should be developed to avoid questions and concerns regarding online instruction.

An informal peer review process would be a non-threatening structure in which to assess the quality and effectiveness of online learning and to ensure that the curricula are substantial and coherent. NPC could begin a voluntary informal peer review process among all online instructors where participants could review the peer reviewer comments and suggestions for improvement in delivery methods.

It is also important that students understand what is required to be successful in an online course before the class begins. On the college web site, there is currently a frequently asked question about online classes which may not be enough. Previously in this report, a discussion occurred regarding student orientation and/or a student success course. Many colleges have found it helpful to have part of that online, so students are able to learn what occurs in an online course. Other colleges have gone to having a student orientation for online learning before they start the course; that should include certain tasks a student must do before class occurs so they can make an informed decision if online is a mode in which they could prosper.

Future plans for continued development of online learning beyond the stated content areas should be conducted openly and honestly in a data-driven environment. Specific planning typically includes a feasibility study, as well as an operational plan. Issues that could be explored would include sustainability, training, maintenance, support, assessment, and student services. Additionally, a marketing plan is a vital component of planning for colleges that have successful online programs.

D. Planning

The college must be cautious about the multiple planning processes that are taking place at NPC overall. Although not intentionally competitive, they may not be aligned well with the realities of available resources. The administration and board's plan to list those projects or operations that might need to be eliminated due to budgeting problems is commendable; however, it is imperative that there is college-wide *consensus* on what priorities will rise to the top. There may be questions that have not been fully addressed that will help to guide the college community to a consensus on priorities. Such questions might include: Will college growth come from transfer or career and technical programs? Will future enrollment growth come from online and alternative delivery or classroom programs? How does the planning for future growth and campus planning connect with student recruitment? How does it connect with fundraising? How do plans for workforce development coordinate with the continued enhancement of existing campus facilities?

It is also imperative that budget cuts don't overtake planning; it is critical that even during this time the college continues to move forward with new initiatives and looks to future endeavors.

E. Shared Governance

From the interviews with administration and the descriptions presented in the self study, NPC views shared governance as an opportunity to advance the institution through an inclusive shared vision and a commitment to involvement by all. Some faculty interviewed verbally noted their commitment, but further movement in this area seems to have been delayed in terms of an association response. Adjunct faculty as well as full-time faculty and staff shared during the team visit that they felt now a clear voice and inclusion at the college, and to this end, a culture shift from the challenges of the past presidential changes seems to have settled the overall climate of the college.

However, with laissez-faire Board of Directors and a lack of timely participation by faculty leadership, the shared governance approach to decision making will not sustain the test of time, especially in time of challenges with resources and programs. Trust by faculty and a commitment to the process is necessary to establish the level of voice in decision making that clearly the president and administration hope to encourage. Without the commitment to the process on the part of faculty, the administration will have to change directions in order to move the plan and goals forward, which in turn could disenfranchise the faculty as had occurred with the past two presidents.

The administration has proposed a process to facilitate the formal process of shared governance. It might be beneficial for both groups to initiate the formal process for a temporary period of time with the intention of reviewing and modifying to make it work effectively for both groups after the trial period.

F. Recruiting a Diverse Staff

The college asked for consultation in recruiting a diverse staff, particularly faculty. All colleges face challenges in recruiting new employees, though the difficulties in rural areas are more extreme. Nevertheless, it is important the NPC provides an environment of diversity that mirrors the student body.

Developing a process to “grow your own” with faculty is essential to your success in to expand the number of minority faculty. Identifying current students and graduates and friends of the college that are interested in teaching and then providing opportunities to be connected to the college throughout their continued education is essential. Then when they have graduated giving them an opportunity to be a part-time teacher should keep them connected and ready for a full-time position.

In the hiring process it is prudent for hiring teams to identify acceptable candidates that are unranked. That may assist in a broader number of candidates forwarded for each position and give the administration a better opportunity to hire a diverse candidate. A recruiting and hiring orientation/training program could be of assistance. That should include a briefing of selection committees on legal issues, interviewing and selection processes in a fair and non-discriminatory manner.

G. Program Outcomes

As was evident through the Self Study, Chapter Five, and confirmed in conversations with both full-time and adjunct faculty, course level learning outcomes are established

for all courses and many strategies for assessment are in place, although with need for expansion and support. As noted in the Self Study as well, the goal of March 2009 for program level student learning outcomes was in process, and through interviews with faculty and the fact that the researcher was quite new to the college, data from these efforts may be delayed. The decisions made to affect student learning must be grounded in information and data related to outcomes assessment, and although work has been done in this area that demonstrates a college commitment, more inclusion and involvement from all faculty will be necessary to accomplish this goal. Program-level outcomes are often difficult to define. While it is easy to envision program outcomes as the aggregate of the course outcomes within the program of study, there are also somewhat unique outcomes at program's end. These may be seen as transcendent outcomes (e.g., both transfer and technical students develop critical thinking and analytical skills), or super ordinate (technical students develop work ethic/attitudes). In either case, roots of these outcomes can be found in specific courses, but no individual course provides the level of proficiency desired and expected at program conclusion. Historically, transfer "programs" have used general education outcomes as program measures, sometimes adding transcendent skills such as effective collaboration. Whichever pattern NPC chooses, the critical element is that NPC chooses. Program outcomes must match program definitions. In technical programs, these can often be derived from discussions with faculty and advisory committees. Because there is increasing overlap between transfer and technical programs (more and more technical grads eventually transfer), it is reasonable to expect some overlap in program outcomes, although perhaps at different levels of proficiency. Accordingly, the college is encouraged to involve the widest possible group of faculty in the deliberation over program outcomes, in the definition of both the outcomes and the direct measures which will reflect success in its achievement.

H. District Governing Board's Role

Talking with faculty, staff and administration many felt that the Board's role in the college isn't well defined and often times involvement in the College is very limited. In the self-study little discussion occurred regarding the Board at all.

The three members of the Board that the team met with were knowledgeable about the college. However, because of the open meeting law in Arizona the team member could only meet with two of the members at a time. The meeting had not been posted as an open meeting of the Board. It was also noted that the other two members of the board had not acknowledged if they were attending, or not.

The Board, just like the college has gone through unstable times with changes in administration. That period of time appears to have come to an end. The college has gone through a time of challenging and reviewing individual's roles, department's roles and those of the college. The Board has not reviewed their role, the team would encourage the Board to review and clarify their role.

Reviewing a governance model of Boards and adopting a model would be helpful to the College and improve the Board. One specific group that is recognized for their leadership in working with two-year College Boards is the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT). They provide workshops and/or individualized training that is helpful to the Board such as a Guide to Trustee Roles and Responsibilities, Governance of Learning Institutions, and Board Self-Assessment. Training needs to

occur as a Board with the College President and top administration so that the development of a collegiate model of governance is adopted and accepted by all. Other groups could provide similar training.

As part of a comprehensive plan communication should be addressed. A communication plan would assist in developing a working understanding of the roles and responsibilities among the various levels, and providing a means of collaboration and support. This could include a training plan for Board members, communication process/timelines between Board and Administration, and shared governance procedures. This communication piece within and outside of the College is essential to address the concerns of the noninvolvement of the Board by college personnel.

As part of the review of the Board's role an orientation process for new Board members could be considered. It would give each person a consistent foundation for an understanding of the College. Some meetings and areas to consider when putting together a formal orientation could include: meeting with the President, Vice Presidents, budget, foundation, planning (strategic, facilities and academic), training on the Board's Governance model and other areas that the District Board President and College President find important.

I. Recognition of Significant Accomplishments, Progress, and/or Practices

The college has gone through significant turnover in Presidential leadership. The current administration is respected by all on campus, and has helped the college move forward in a positive direction. The approach to the Self-Study, along with strategic planning, helped the college to identify their strengths and areas where improvement needs to occur. Joining the assessment academy has moved the college forward, so that when they complete the formal academy, the momentum will continue to keep this moving. The economic turmoil occurring in Arizona and throughout the country has had a direct impact on NPC's budget, which will continue for the unforeseen future. The approach, which is being used to identify where funding can be reduced, is open and involves many different constituencies in the college.

The faculty, staff, administration and Board of Trustees are very dedicated to making access of courses/programs affordable and available to students. The college is a learner-centered institution.