

SPOTLIGHTS

College Experiences in the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative

An Evaluation Activity

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Participate | Collaborate | Innovate

This vignette is the fourth in a series of college spotlights relating the experiences and benefits gained from participation in the Partnership Resource Team (PRT) and from the goal setting activities using the framework of indicators under the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative (IEPI).

The PRT process provides technical assistance to institutions to help identify, develop and implement ways to improve their institutional effectiveness. The indicator framework is designed to help colleges assess progress primarily for internal planning purposes.

This document represents an evaluation activity with two objectives: First, to share the experiences of the participating institutions with the field to build collective learning; and second, to help gauge the effectiveness and significance of the IEPI components.

The vignette is based on structured interviews with institutional and PRT team leaders, results of a focus group with the Ventura College work team, and a review of the documents completed as part of the process.

The focus of this spotlight centers on the Ventura College experience through the PRT process itself. Subsequent editions of this publication will highlight the unique stories of additional colleges.



Forward-Looking Accreditation: PRTs and Proactive Quality Assurance

From the outset, a principal objective of the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative (IEPI) has been to reduce the number of accreditation sanctions by providing support to client institutions in need of assistance.

“We had a very successful accreditation visit, report, and outcome. Yes, we used many resources to get a successful accreditation visit, ATD (Achieving the Dream), local efforts, etc., but the PRT played an important role in helping start the process.”

*-Ventura College President
Dr. Greg Gillespie.*

The number and gravity of sanctions imposed on California community colleges had become matters of concern, and the state authorized IEPI as part of its brief to provide institutions additional resources to improve their effectiveness in light of accreditation standards.

It is useful to note, however, that the vast majority of colleges participating in IEPI activities are not under any form of accreditation sanction. Interestingly, then, the efforts of IEPI's Partnership Resource Teams (PRTs) to date extend beyond advancing the state policy goal of decreasing sanctions to improving college practices overall, whether or not the institution is under some accreditation sanction.

This issue of Spotlight focuses on one college that took a proactive, forward-looking approach to accreditation-related issues through PRT technical assistance.

“QUALITY-FOCUSED”

“We knew we had an accreditation visit coming, but it was by no means right around the corner. So, we had time, and we wanted to do it right,” noted Ventura College President Dr. Greg Gillespie. “We did not want to experience the cycle of

accreditation recommendation, reaction, and damage control,” he concluded.

To help “do it right,” Ventura College submitted a letter of interest to participate in the PRT process.

“In many ways, we wanted the PRT visit to be a supportive, ‘mini accreditation visit’ to get the college on track for the accreditation preparation,” added Dr. Kimberly Hoffmans, vice president of Academic Affairs and Student Learning. “We wanted help in a nonthreatening setting.”

As a result, Ventura established clear outcomes for the PRT process before the technical assistance team ever set foot on the college campus.

One such clear outcome was to enlist PRT help both in developing plans to improve accreditation-critical processes as part of the institutional self-evaluation and in creating action projects for the new accreditation expectation, the Quality Focus Essay (QFE).

THE QFE



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Colleges have always been asked as part of the accreditation self-evaluation process to identify areas where effectiveness can be improved. Using a wide range of monikers over the years, including “planning agenda” items, “improvement plans,” and now “changes and plans” arising out of the self-evaluation process, the accrediting commission has focused on areas of improvement

that a college’s existing processes and systems could fix.

Now, accreditation expectations go much further. Institutions are now expected to push their collective thinking and consider areas of needed change, development, institutionalization, and expansion. Resolving these areas of consideration requires the colleges to innovate.

To this end, colleges develop a multi-year, long-term plan (the QFE) containing two to three large action projects for concentrated work. The QFE is actually an innovation plan for which the college creates and contemplates novel ways to address what in many instances are long-time, nagging challenges.

In a decided pivot away from past practice, the commission intends to analyze the QFE action projects as “critical focal points” for a college’s mid-term accreditation cycle report.

This outside-the-box approach, while in line with the present thinking of the age of innovation, is new for many colleges and, as a result, challenging.

FIVE OBJECTIVES

WITH RESPECT TO IMPROVING COMMUNICATION IN THE INNOVATION & EFFECTIVENESS PLAN:

- Clarify terms, roles, representation, and responsibilities of all college groups;
- Create and publish an easily accessible meeting calendar;
- Establish a consistent practice to inform the campus community of all applicable events;
- Train group leaders on meeting facilitation skills;
- Update and keep website current.

THE PRT AND THE QFE

"I could see where things were going with the QFE, and Ventura was in only the second cohort of colleges required to create one, so I figured this was a great opportunity to do something different," noted Gillespie.

"Like all colleges, we have areas that we knew we needed to work on. For Ventura, it was to find better and more efficient ways to communicate. We knew that," added Hoffmans.

Good timing played a part in deciding what to address. "Importantly, we had had some turnover in some key administrative positions at the college," continued Hoffmans, "but we saw this situation as a chance to leverage the sense of newness to our advantage."

Gillespie summed up the approach this way: "We were going to use the PRT visit and the tools provided by the team to form the basis of our Quality Focus Essay."

Visit One

At the first visit in the PRT process, the information-gathering stage, Ventura put the PRT to work, holding meetings with 13 different groups and committees in one day.

"The first visit itself focused on understanding [among other things] current college communication processes," said Phillip Briggs, dean of Institutional Equity and Effectiveness.

The PRT's discussions with a wide array of faculty, staff, administrators, and students, presented in a Summary of Initial Visit, confirmed that members of the college community shared the judgment of college leaders concerning what Ventura needed. "The PRT confirmed what we already suspected," observed Hoffmans.

Ventura included these findings

VALUE IN PRT VISITS

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in the institutional self-evaluation report (ISER), expressly noting the PRT confirmed that "Ventura College has a need to improve the communication, trust, decision making, and integrated

This was certainly a brave thing to do, and one not common in accreditation reports, where writing about areas of challenge for a college is often seen as an opening for the commission to levy a sanction.

Gillespie declared, "I wanted this to be honest and transparent from the get-go. That's why I sent the letter of interest to bring the PRT here in the first place. A good accreditation site visit team finds these things, so we thought we would address them now."

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Visit Two

Three months later, four members of the PRT came back to the college and reviewed with Ventura a tool in the IEPI tool belt, called the Menu of Options (MOO). Containing concrete ideas for improvement, best practices, and models and examples in the identified areas of focus, the MOO affords the college a head-start on practices to consider, rather than having to come up with all those ideas on their own.

"We identified three best practices from the Menu of Options with respect to communication and put them into use as part of the innovation and effectiveness plan," Briggs shared. "We also included

planning between all committees, workgroups, departments, programs, and levels." The college also included the Summary of Initial Visit as an exhibit in the ISER.



As the college began to inventory current practices to foster student learning and achievement, the groups began to reflect on their actions to foster success in each other.

other areas like integrated planning, but improved communication was a big area of focus for the college.”

Hoffmans noted, “The PRT gave us what we wanted: a peer-based team that would be honest, nonjudgmental, and help us as we prepared for the evaluation, which comes with an accreditation visit.”

Clear expectations of the role of the PRT were shared with Ventura at the beginning of the visit. “Our PRT lead made it clear that the goal was for the team to help us help ourselves. That was important. It is very different than an accreditation visit where a decision is being made,” concluded Hoffmans.

The college then identified five objectives with respect to improving Communication in its Innovation and Effectiveness Plan:

1. **CLARIFY** terms, roles, representation, and responsibilities of all college groups;
2. **CREATE** and publish an easily accessible meeting calendar;
3. **ESTABLISH** a consistent practice to inform the campus

community of all applicable events;

4. **TRAIN** group leaders on meeting facilitation skills;

5. **UPDATE** and keep website current.

The objectives helped inform the larger action project for improved communication contained in the Ventura QFE.

“NOBODY READS THEM”

In fall 2015, Gillespie had begun sending out a monthly newsletter, and the vice presidents had each followed suit in spring 2016.

However, “nobody reads them” was a comment shared with the PRT. Undaunted, the college expanded its efforts to show that more and varied ways to share information were going to be implemented and that lines of communication were going to remain open.

Comments in the Ventura College employee satisfaction survey unearthed some deep-seated areas of distrust, tension, and stress that underlay the larger communication issues.

“We needed to get off campus to meet. We needed to have some fun to show that while these communication issues we were wrestling were serious, we were not going to let them affect how we were going to act toward one another,” Gillespie said.

Again, the college transparently reproduced more than 15 open-ended comments from the satisfaction survey and comments from other sources in the ISER, laying out for the accreditation site team (and the commission) that communication was an area of focus that Ventura needed and intended to address.

“We were going to put things out there in the open,” said Gillespie. “One of the things we started right from the first PRT visit: we were going to address the issues that we knew a good site team would discover about us.”

Hoffmans added, “We knew that communication was an issue we could not ignore, so why not make it a focus of the QFE? The PRT helped us put this mindset into place.”

REDEFINING (RE)DEFINED

To help focus the attention of the college on improved communication, college leaders stepped back and reflected that the goal of the college’s combined efforts as part of its mission was improving student learning and success.

As part of the process, the college used the study authored by Dr. Darla Cooper, director of Research and Evaluation for the RP Group, entitled Student Success (Re)defined to direct its collective attention on student success.

As part of her work, Cooper identified five factors in the affective domain that students indicated are important to them



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when fostering their academic learning: directedness, focus, connection, engagement, value, and nurturing.

As the college began to inventory current practices to foster student learning and achievement, the groups began to reflect on their actions to foster success in each other. If meeting these primary and uniquely human factors positively impacts student success, would not attention to these factors improve the relationships of college professionals as well?

Ventura used IEPI PRT Seed Grant funds to bring Cooper to the college to facilitate discussions on the student success (re)defined factors—this time with the lens on themselves.

“Oh, this was intentional,” noted Cooper, “this is a logical extension to me.”

Cooper continued, “Don’t workers want to feel valued, nurtured? Staff who feel valued are more likely to ‘stick it out’ and ‘put up with stuff’ because they feel that they matter.”

Cooper argues that unless college professionals are successful in the goal to improve communication, trust, and collegiality toward each other, there is not much hope to achieve this goal with our students. “What we teach in Student Success (Re)defined can be taught to college teams as well,” concluded Cooper.

Ventura College then went on a “Treasure Hunt,” finding evidence of the six factors in their day-to-day work. “We went around finding evidence of how we value each other, how we nurture each other. And, we took pictures of it,” recounted Hoffmans.

Ventura took the lead from the

college mascot, the Pirate, and included the maritime metaphor in the QFE, calling the communication action project the “Beacons of Success.”

“It was a lot of fun,” noted Hoffmans.

SHARING THE PRT EXPERIENCE

The college leaders plainly found the participation of the PRT in the creation of a QFE action project a positive experience.

“The PRT process was very effective at starting the conversations at the college about accreditation that we knew we needed to have,” observed Briggs. Other college leaders found the PRT members objective and open and the PRT environment safe.

“We had a very successful accreditation visit, report, and outcome. Yes, we used many resources to get a successful accreditation visit, ATD (Achieving the Dream), local efforts, etc., but the PRT played an important role in helping start the process,” said Gillespie.

It must have, as Gillespie, Hoffmans, and Briggs delivered a presentation on the PRT process and its role in Ventura’s accreditation work at the Community College League of California conference in November 2016. ■

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