

Reflections on Leading at Mt. San Antonio College

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Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) is a large community college in Walnut, California with over 60,000 students enrolled each year. The college functions largely using a participatory governance model whereby matters of academic significance are referred to the faculty for their review. Administration and faculty/classified relations are, for the most part, collegial, although there are clear areas that need improvement. Mt. SAC is an excellent place of employment, and the employees are usually interested in utilizing a collaborative approach to improving operations for the sake of improving student learning.

The culture of the campus is to persevere until the job is done—no matter what it takes. Yet the constraints are many, including not having the backing of the correct people, being too early/late in your suggestions, not being heard, and not being able to present your idea in a way that others will grasp/hear/value.

As the director of research and institutional effectiveness, my role is to provide guidance, support, leadership, and recommendations for actions as they relate to accreditation, student learning outcomes, general education outcomes, research, planning, and institutional effectiveness. I report to the vice president of instruction and I also work closely with the college president on many institution-wide matters such as integrated planning, board of trustee reports, and accountability projects, to mention a few. I oversee reassigned time faculty working on outcomes assessment and accreditation.

One problem that we have sought to address was how the college was going to become better prepared for its October 2010 accreditation site visit. It was clear that the college still had a lot to accomplish related to integrated planning, budgeting and planning, faculty engagement in student learning outcomes, and classified employee involvement.

Leadership Framework

Before I embarked on this three-year project, I did a lot of soul searching and reading. I came up with a type of framework to address this exciting, stressful, and liberating time, knowing full well that I would be pulled in many directions depending on the situation. Here is my strategic framework for the accreditation review process:

Role: I wanted to share the leadership role with my faculty co-chair, the accreditation liaison officer, and administration, as well as whoever was the most qualified to lead at that time

Supporter: I wanted to be a supportive facilitator to help as needed and provide guidance when asked

Motivator: I wanted to motivate people to listen and help each other to try their best

Development: Whenever possible, I wanted to provide professional development opportunities for all employees

Spokesperson: I wanted to provide a different spokesperson depending on the message and target audience

Grounded: I needed to be willing to ask for help, be self-aware, self-assured, and secure, know when I don't know the answer and own up to it, rely on the experts (it is not always me), share the glory, own the mistakes, be thoughtful, directive, clear, and purposeful (i.e., have a clear goal and make sure to share it with all)

Data: I needed to ensure that the narrative of the self-study was demonstrating when data was being used for decision-making and when it was not, and I needed to acknowledge when the research and planning activities of my department and the college could be improved upon

Coach: I needed to use my many soft skills (e.g., communication, negotiating, listening, asking questions) in guiding staff, management, and faculty in interpreting data in a practical, important way and using it for improvement purposes—in essence, creating an environment of inquiry

Relationships: I needed to build upon my already solid relationships and create new ones as I embarked on this large project, in which I was clearly going to be more intrusive in others' departments and their work

OCD: I needed to use any obsessive compulsive disorders that I possessed for good in order to be diligent to ensure the college's resources were utilized optimally in the service of a thorough, accurate, and well documented self-study

Moving Forward: I needed to engage employees and encourage their responsiveness and positive perspectives about finding ways to get out of the rut of focusing on issues that happened 5-10-20-30 years ago

Listening: I needed to listen to stories about what the groups needed, ask critical clarifying questions, listen to their solutions, suggest solutions, and provide clear examples of their expected work so that they felt encouraged to progress through what was very tedious work

Project Management: I needed to work collaboratively with faculty leaders, academic senate, and administration, all while using project management planning to ensure that all those responsible for deadlines knew them and knew their goals

Developing Leadership Opportunities for Others

Throughout this process, I also needed to create leadership opportunities for others, so that when the self-study was over, the leadership work would naturally continue:

- I included most of the research staff as members of the self-study teams and helped them to see accreditation as part of their job and a means of contributing to improving student learning
- I worked closely with all constituent groups to have their members represented on the teams in a more consistent manner than during the 2004 self-study
- We (including my faculty co-chair and the president) reviewed multiple drafts of the self-study and provided positive and constructive feedback to teams about how to improve upon it, including guiding areas for consideration and suggested narrative
- We created multiple opportunities for the college to improve in many areas by hosting many Integrated Planning Summits, facilitating joint committee meetings, and providing directive work with leaders in specific areas

- We created a 30-day review period where the campus and the public could review the draft and provide directive feedback on how to improve upon it—something that was not done during the 2004 self-study
- We created accreditation newsletters to inform the college of the directions/actions being taken and how they could get involved
- I created a Planning for Excellence newsletter to inform the campus of the many integrated planning endeavors—areas across campus were approached for their stories and it was up to them to write them; thus, only those who were motivated and savvy took on this task

Success

Throughout the process, while we were not perfect in every way, we were able to work closely with many groups to achieve an outstanding accreditation self-study report that granted the college commendations without qualifications—a rarity. The areas where the college needed further work were outlined in the report and are being used as the impetus for exploration across the college as employees continue their goal of improvement.

Final Reflection

We are all high achievers. We want to get the highest grade, but it doesn't always happen and we have to be able to accept an imperfect outcome and use it as leverage for change. Having an outside group tell us where our weaknesses are and what we could do to fix them was very helpful as we progressed through the stages of grieving at their evaluation—everything from shock and denial to anger and bargaining and finally ending with acceptance and hope.

As a leader, it is vital to be able to cope with whatever comes your way and try to see the positive in it. Institutional researchers and planners need to maintain persistent optimism and face challenges head on, with a focus on improving student learning, while understanding that multiple people/groups will cycle through leadership roles, including themselves. The goal is to have the final product completed in such a way so that it is integrated and institutionalized and can withstand the test of time and leadership changes.