
PCC Discusses: Accountability and PCC

BACKGROUND

The term “Accountability” has been increasingly used to express the need for more controls and oversight in the educational process. At PCC, faculty, staff and administrators are “held accountable” by a variety of internal and external institutional processes. Most directly, PCC is held accountable by the accreditation process monitored by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). PCC has worked to meet an expanded accreditation process in a number of ways, including Program Review and the formation of the faculty Learning Assessment Council.

Accreditation is required for institutions to participate in Federal student aid programs, among other things. Part of the changes set in motion by accreditors concern how quality in education should be assured. Traditionally, colleges and universities have sought to guarantee quality through controlling the **inputs** of education -- primarily through setting the kind and level of credentials required to teach at a college level, and through faculty/staff/administration participation in hiring committees. An additional approach to quality assurance has been to focus on the **process** of education -- as examples, administrators draw attention to best practices, create centers of teaching excellence (such as our TLCs), and provide opportunities for continual professional development, along with regular classroom evaluations by peers or administrators. But, recently there has been a focus on the **outputs** (such as student learning outcomes) of the educational process, with alternative ways to measure whether and to what extent students are actually learning the knowledge, or gaining competence at the skill level, associated with their degrees. This move to outcome focus is a significant change. Staff, faculty and administrators at PCC have all had job requirements change in response to a new focus on accountability. The major purpose of these forums is to help create opportunities for conversations across our job categories and tasks. Some people at PCC are embracing the changes brought about through this increased emphasis on outputs, some are lamenting changes they believe make it harder to serve our students. Some people are openly resisting the changes. There is no standard response. Our goal is to help dedicated members of PCC compare the reasons for their different responses, and start to get a sense of the trade-offs required to be accountable as an educational institution.

Approach ONE overview: INPUTS

PCC should trust and support competent professionals

Individuals are the drivers of innovation and improvement in Higher Education. To foster excellence in teaching and learning, the administration can provide opportunities -- and funding, along with release time -- for staff and faculty development. But much of what is newly required -- Program Review and annual SAC assessment reports, for example -- takes attention and energy away from direct work with students. Even worse, some initiatives -- like student evaluations of courses -- encourage faculty to adopt practices that will make them more popular, instead of those that really challenge students to learn and grow. Faculty are reaching a critical overload as they are asked to master new software, take on new committee work, and become involved in increasing quasi-administrative tasks. Institutional initiatives can serve either to help or hinder the work of these dedicated professionals -- but they can never substitute for it.

Approach TWO Overview: PROCESS

PCC should require and support professional collaboration.

Rather than rejecting this wave of accountability in Higher Education, the best approach for PCC is to keep control of the process ourselves. Accountability initiatives can be useful when they motivate conversation and collaboration, and are led by genuine curiosity and our shared goal of better serving PCC students. Most staff and faculty are highly motivated professionals, but they usually work in relative isolation. PCC's current accountability practices are creating feedback loops allowing us to improve the quality of our many services, and they are meeting our external accreditation requirements *without* handing over assessment to outside agencies. This is to be celebrated. But there are still many ways we can enter this new era of collaboration. We are, for example, still working in separate "silos" which divide us into academic and student services, Career/Technical disciplines versus Lower Division Collegiate areas, and across the multiple separate campuses. We need to find new ways to collaborate across these traditional divides in order to improve student access/success.

Approach THREE overview: OUTPUTS

PCC should embrace the move to evidence-based educational practice.

Higher Education needs wholesale reform. We need data-driven decision making at all levels -- including hiring, promotion, and tenure. The needed changes will likely be resisted by people invested in maintaining the status quo. But, for the benefit of current and future students, changes must be made. We should not try to keep internal constituencies happy, but need to keep our eyes on the responsibilities to multiple external stakeholders (taxpayers, the community -- including the business community) as well as our direct beneficiaries, students. Most people who work at PCC are well-meaning and conscientious, but they have simply not had access to data showing how badly we are collectively doing on our mission. It is time for us to revisit our commitment to our vision, and face the hard truth that if we really care about improving lives, we may need to make some significant changes based on the evidence.

Method and Assumptions

This conversation is structured using techniques developed by the Kettering Foundation, and shared with the new Center for Civic Participation at PCC through a year-long mentorship.

Method: Volunteers with the Center developed interview questions regarding how accountability plays out at PCC, then fanned out to solicit answers from people at PCC. We talked with faculty from both Lower Division and Career Technical fields, Academic Professionals, Classified Staff, Administrators, and providers of Student Services. Then volunteers combed through the replies, looking for recurring themes and ideas. We organized those into the three “approaches” presented here. Where possible, we use direct quotes from PCC community members -- or quotes with a bit of editing (for clarity or brevity) -- to illustrate these approaches.

Assumptions: This conversation structure is part of a broad movement to create alternatives to polarized, adversarial, and polemical conversations. We believe the typical ways people engage in discussions about needed collective responses to social, political, environmental, and economic issues makes *enemies* out of *those who disagree* with one another. This leads to either an engagement of destruction (to solve a problem I must obliterate my opponent) OR a cynical or despairing dis-engagement. We believe there are more options, and that the problems facing humans on this little planet at this time require “all hands on deck.” We need all points of view brought to the table, but expressed within a structure that helps people listen and learn across their many differences. Our conversations are crafted to help participants engage in deliberation and dialogue.

We assume that:

- When people are talking in order to “win” points or “defeat the opposition” they are simply unable to listen and learn from others
- As humans, we all come with cognitive blindnesses and biases and the only way to correct for these individual limitations is to make common cause in exploring issues with those who come from different background experiences, and who start the conversation with extremely different initial ideas of how to proceed.
- Difference in opinion is a resource that can improve collective decision making, and not an impediment to consensus that must be eradicated (usually by “defeating” the wrong-headed!)
- Lasting controversies are usually due to the different ways people prioritize shared values -- and not due to differences in values as is widely assumed; a reliable process for prioritizing values requires that we first gain a comprehensive understanding of the trade-offs necessitated by each approach.