Academic Audit Site Visit Report

Pellissippi State Community College
University Parallel Program
April 17, 2015

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Introduction

A three-member audit team conducted an on-site visit on April 17, 2015 at Pellissippi State Community College (PSCC), Hardin Valley Campus. The visit was a component of an academic audit of the University Parallel Program. Pellissippi is one of thirteen community colleges in the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) system. The audit team included from members from other TBR institutions: Debra McCarter, Vice President for Planning, Research and Assessment at Walters State Community College; Jim Kelly, Associate Professor of History, Northeast State Community College; Christine Couch Conn, Director, Education Programs, at Chattanooga State Community College.). Prior to the visit, the team conferred via email as well as during a pre-visit meeting on the evening before the site visit.

The University Parallel Program is housed in four academic departments — English, Liberal Arts, Mathematics, and Natural and Behavioral Sciences. Learning support is also integrated into this departments. The courses offered satisfy the majority of requirements for four Associate degrees designed for transfer, and are offered through a variety of modes including traditional face-to-face, hybrid, two-way audio, DVD and online.

In preparation for the visit, team members reviewed the college’s self-study report, master syllabi, planning reports, various webpages, and General Education assessment reports. The site visit began with a brief plenary session that included administrators and faculty leaders of the audit self-study process. Throughout the day, the team was able to meet with other stakeholders including program faculty, department deans, and key administrators from the areas of institutional effectiveness and advisement. The audit team also met students who had completed the program and transferred courses to the University of Tennessee. The site visit concluded with an exit session in which the audit team presented its commendations, affirmations, and recommendations as well as its assessment of applicable criteria for consideration of Performance Funding.

The candor and culture of collaboration emphasized in the self-study process was also evident during the site visit, as all institutional participants engaged in thoughtful conversations with the audit team members and expressed the desire to improve education quality processes.

Overall Performance

Pellissippi’s self-study of the University Parallel Program is predicated on the underlying principles of the Academic Audit affirming the college’s commitment to defining quality in terms of outcomes.
The college has developed and implemented a number of collaborative, comprehensive processes to assist in monitoring overall performance of the University Parallel Program. These processes, which will be discussed in greater detail throughout this report, have created a culture of collaboration across the academic departments that make up the University Parallel program. From the conclusions of the audit self-study and conversations with faculty, students, and administrators on-site, it is clear that PSCC’s University Parallel Program has a strong sense of mission and provides a high quality of instruction. Faculty are clearly committed to student learning, innovative in their approaches to instruction, and respected by students. The audit resulted in several initiatives proposed to enhance faculty professional development and improve management of assessment activities.

**Performance in the Focal Areas**

**Focal Area 1: Learning Objectives**

The University Parallel program focuses on the core college competences expected of all graduates, which state that PSCC graduates should be able to 1) write clearly, 2) read proficiently, 3) communicate orally, 4) analyze and use quantitative information, 5) solve problems and 6) use technology effectively. These competencies align with the system-wide General Education requirements established by the TBR. Competencies are taught in general education course that must be approved by the college and the TBR system office to facilitate transfer. For each approved course, a master syllabus is posted to the college curriculum website and includes two categories of student learning outcomes — course goals and expected student learning outcomes.

The PSCC faculty and staff have identified an important improvement initiative related to learning objectives: to establish a regular schedule for review and revision of Master Syllabi. In their self-study they acknowledge that “some departments have also recognized the need to emphasize learning objectives more directly to students and to point out more explicitly how course assignments are tied to learning objectives.” During the site visit, the administrative team clearly stated their commitment to helping faculty improve teaching and learning. Faculty members acknowledged the importance of “clarity of the words they use in their syllabi.” Within the self-study there was an obvious commitment to revise courses as needed to facilitate university transfer and to meet the needs of the community and employers.

**Focal Area 2: Curriculum and Co-curriculum**

The spirit of collaboration was evident during the site visit in the development of curriculum and co-curriculum. “Revisions to learning outcomes and then, as necessary, to
curriculum are determined collaboratively by all full-time faculty who are involved in teaching the course.” One faculty member said that as an instructor at Pellissippi, he felt that he was a part of a “culture that encourages faculty to grow their strengths.” During the site visit the faculty highlighted the importance of learning across the disciplines. Interviews affirmed that faculty collaboration extends beyond faculty who teach in the respective departments. Faculty work with colleagues in other departments at PSCC and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tennessee to assure that core courses prepare students for coursework in other disciplines as well as for transfer.

The faculty were proud to discuss the success of the Common Academic Experience. The students spoke enthusiastically about the Common Academic Experience as well. One student spoke about the importance of service learning. Her experience working with the food bank at one of the off-site campuses helped her connect with the broader mission of the college.

The students were outspoken about the level of compassion and caring that they experience from the Pellissippi instructors. They said that the support system at the college was marvelous and that the smaller community college setting made for a smooth transition from high school to college.

As stated in the self-study, faculty “investigate and incorporate best practices in course content and delivery; they encourage students to develop the important competencies of communication and critical thinking not only through course materials, but through participation in extra-curricular events at the College and in the community and the world.”

Focal Area 3: Teaching and Learning

The college’s very professional and well-written self-study report raised some questions about the degree of student engagement in the teaching and learning process. While much evidence was presented about faculty involvement in this process, such as statements that “Both full-time and adjunct faculty have many opportunities, within their departments and across the College, to learn about and to develop best practices in teaching and learning” (p. 9), evidence was lacking to explain exactly how students were actively engaged in these processes, especially with the College’s active-learning-focused QEP.

After meeting with various focus groups, composed of administrators, faculty, and students, doubts about student engagement were dispelled, as the audit team heard much evidence about student-centered activities and assessments. The faculty, in particular, shared a multitude of activities they used in their classroom to insure student engagement, from “tactile writing” assignments in English classes, to creative projects in art, speech, and science-based classes. One English faculty member made the telling comment that in her classes students were not only encouraged to write well but to also “think about writing” as a process. The audit team was impressed by ongoing efforts to
involve adjunct faculty in this process, such as Saturday training sessions and meetings to accommodate adjunct work schedules. The auditors, along with those participating in the interviews, acknowledged that engaging adjunct faculty is a continuous challenge.

As is often the case with Academic Audit visits, the student interviews were a highlight of the day. Two students, both in the medical field, were enthusiastic about the levels of student engagement and faculty “compassion and care” they had experienced at the college. One of the students, who is currently enrolled in classes at both Pellissippi and at a regional university, commented that her experience at Pellissippi, in terms of faculty involvement in the teaching and learning process, was superior. When asked to rate the level of faculty-student engagement at Pellissippi on a scale of 1-10, one student placed the level at 8-10, while the other rated it a 10. Both students were extremely satisfied with the ways in which the faculty and staff of the college are preparing them for life and career skills.

Two areas for improving the levels of student engagement were discussed in the focus group sessions. All agreed, first of all, that improvements could be made in the collection of student feedback about the teaching and learning process. Second, there seemed to be a willingness to include media other than just books (i.e. film, music, art) in the College’s successful Common Academic Experience (CAE) initiative, as a way of furthering student engagement; the students also suggested this improvement in their interview.

Focal Area 4: Student Learning Assessment

The faculty, staff, and students at PSCC are dedicated to a continuous assessment process, and this commitment is reflected in the College’s QEP, tutoring programs (including a well-received supplemental instructor initiative), and professional development (reflected, in part, by a New Faculty Academy, which is entering its second year of implementation). All of these programs are aimed at furthering student engagement and success, as well as providing meaningful analytics that can be used to determine where and when improvements and perhaps new programs are needed.

One of the most thorough sections of the College’s self-study report is the one on Student Learning Assessment, which eloquently states that “the abilities to write clearly, read proficiently, communicate orally, analyze and use quantitative information, solve problems, and use technology effectively” are essential to the College’s educational mission. This goal provides the benchmark used for measuring the relative successes and shortcomings of the College’s assessment of its General Education program. Although the self-study report is very transparent about revealing some of the problem areas faced with student learning assessment (i.e. the fact that an English 1010

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assessment reveals that some indicators on a study of final writing assignments fell considerably below the expected standards), there runs throughout this section a willingness to learn from this data and to engage in a collaborative effort to improve those things that need improvement. There is also an evident attempt being made to enlarge the scope of some assessments, such as the expansion of the QEP beyond the originally-targeted disciplines, in an effort to capitalize on the strengths and successes of the process.

One area of acknowledged weakness, which was discussed in the focus groups, grew out of a statement made in the self-study that “results of college-wide assessment have not been routinely shared and discussed with the entire college community.” Although correcting this apparent weakness was not included in the audit team’s recommendations, all agreed that these results should be more widely disseminated in the future.

All in all, the College seems to be committed to the assessment process and is focused on making this process better, while at the same time learning how to turn weaknesses and data gaps into continuous improvement efforts based on College-wide collaboration.

**Focal Area 5: Quality Assurance**

The self-study report cited a number of factors as institutional strengths supporting the assurance of ongoing quality improvement. These factors included course consistency promoted by use of a master course syllabus template, collaboration of the faculty to review and use course assessment data for improvement, and feedback from regional universities about course transfer. All of these measures appear to be deeply embedded in the culture of the college and used by academic administrators in a manner that encourages faculty teamwork and encourages the use of data for improvement.

Conversations with faculty in multiple disciplines provided the audit team with strong evidence of the collaborative spirit in which faculty engage with colleagues within and across disciplines. The Quality Enhancement Plan has been a notable catalysts for professional development. Sharing of teaching techniques and ideas to spur student engagement is an excellent means of encouraging the kind of mutual respect that promotes quality. Particularly appealing aspects of PSCC’s professional development program are the New Faculty Academy and the effort to include adjuncts in all training.
Support for students is emphasized throughout the departments and discipline areas of the University Parallel program. University Parallel faculty serve as student success coordinators, request and support supplemental instructors, and encourage students to avail themselves of tutoring services. Interviews with students affirmed the positive affinity students have for the faculty.

Conclusions

Commendations:

1. The college is to be commended for the excellent self-study report. The document was comprehensive and well-written and addressed the all aspects of the academic audit process.

2. The college is to be commended for the culture of collaboration that supports student engagement and assists faculty to grow their strengths.

3. The college is to be commended for the emphasis on active learning that is tied to learning outcomes.

4. The college is to be commended for the level of engagement shown by both faculty and students.

5. The college is to be commended for establishing professional development activities such as the New Faculty Academy and the inclusion of adjuncts in the professional development activities.

Affirmations:

1. The team affirms the four initiatives identified in the matrix of improvement initiatives and encourages the college to implement them according to the proposed schedule. These initiatives include
   • Establish regular schedule for review & revision of Master Syllabi
   • Certification process established for all instructors of online courses
   • Implement systematic assessment of SLOs within academic departments
   • Implement broad dissemination & discussion of college-wide assessment measures
Recommendations:

1. The team recommends that the college expand opportunities for students to give feedback about their learning experience.

   Students strongly emphasized the care and concern faculty have for them. However, they reported few opportunities to provide feedback about their learning experiences. Given the focus on students evident in the self-study and throughout the interviews, the team encourages the college to create more opportunities for students to provide input throughout their educational experience at PSCC.

Finally, the audit team members wish to thank all of the participants in the Academic Audit of the University Parallel program at PSCC for a warm welcome and a day of interesting and collegial conversations that exemplify the spirit of the process.