

A Place Where Productivity Pays

Dr. Diane O. Tebbetts

**Mid-South Community College
2000 W. Broadway
West Memphis, AR 72301**

Abstract

For several years, Mid-South Community College in West Memphis, Arkansas, has measured its institutional effectiveness through an annual "Productivity Report Card." Components of the Productivity Plan comprised headcount enrollments, student goal attainment, fall-to-spring retention, student satisfaction, and student performance on exit examinations. In addition, the College monitored the racial/ethnic makeup of the student body in comparison to that of its service area. After completing a strategic planning initiative in Spring 2002 which resulted in four goals tied to the concept of the Learning College, Mid-South undertook a complete redevelopment of its Productivity Plan so that all four strategic goals were supported by related productivity measures.

Goal I relates to access, including recruiting, enrolling, and retaining increasing numbers of students. Associated productivity measures include headcount enrollments and fall-to-fall retention. Goal II stresses improvements in student learning, and productivity measures cover success in developmental courses, successful transition from developmental to college-level English and math courses, and end-of-program performance on standardized certification and assessment instruments. Goal III stresses provision of learning support, with measures for circulation of library materials and student use of services provided by the College's Learning Success Center. The final Goal covers effective resource management, including human, physical, and fiscal resources. Measures include availability of scholarships and financial aid, ratios for Instruction & Academic Support and Student Services as percents of Net E & G, Foundation fundraising success, grant awards, student satisfaction, and employee satisfaction. Measures underscore the importance of Learning College principles and examine actual outputs.

Points assigned to measures total 100, so that scores on measures translate easily into a percentage. The College each year establishes a pool equivalent to 4% of salaries for full-time non-classified employees. The percentage score for performance then determines the size of the annual bonus paid out to those employees from the pool. Last spring, the score was 70.1%, and so 70% of the 4% pool (or 2.8% of eligible employees' salaries) was paid out

For last spring's pilot project testing the validity of the new plan, the College gathered the requisite data, resulting in a score of 71% and setting baselines for full implementation this year. Results were shared with all employees so that everyone is aware of areas most in need of improvement. These results also informed several of this year's Operational Planning Objectives. Because improved results in one area can affect compensation for all eligible employees, interest in improvement spreads beyond the area with implementation responsibility, encouraging employees outside those areas to assist in making improvements.

Introduction of the Organization

Mid-South Community College is a two-year public institution primarily serving rural Crittenden County in Eastern Arkansas, part of the poverty-stricken Mississippi River Delta region, which is decades behind more prosperous parts of the country in educational and economic development. While located just across the Mississippi River from downtown Memphis, we have not yet attracted significant attention or enrollment of students from the metropolitan area. To serve the needs of its present and future constituents, we are committed to building a continuum of educational opportunities through alliances with both public schools and other institutions of higher education—on both sides of the river—to increase college-preparedness and to provide local access to baccalaureate and graduate programs and professional training.

MSCC offers four associate degree programs, three one-year technical certificate programs, three one-semester certificate of proficiency programs, business and community education courses, developmental education, and adult education. The College employs 29 full-time instructors, approximately 50 adjuncts, and 69 full-time staff, several of whom also teach classes as part of their regular duties. In addition, we host upper-division and graduate courses offered by other state public universities.

For the past two years, credit enrollment has averaged approximately 1200 students per semester. With only 139 students in the fall of 1993, its first year as a community college, MSCC is obviously still a growing, evolving institution. In addition to the for-credit programs, Business and Community Education and Adult Education each serve approximately 1400 students a year.

Mid-South Community College was created by Arkansas Act 1244 of 1991, which converted 14 of Arkansas' vocational technical schools into technical colleges, branches of four-year institutions, or community colleges (with the additional support of a local millage). In operation since 1979, it experienced little growth or financial support during its twelve years as one of the state's smallest vocational technical schools. The original campus offered only two instructional buildings and a maintenance shop. At the time of the conversion, Mid-South offered primarily adult education classes and occupational programs in practical nursing, over-the-road trucking, welding, data processing and clerical support.

With the 1991 shift in mission and scope, the College began addressing requirements for regional accreditation, and the Board of Trustees started exploring the possibility of developing local funding to support conversion to a community college, having determined that this step was essential to address the weak economy, unemployment, and alarmingly low college-going rate in Crittenden County. Local voters approved a county-wide levy of four mils in early 1993.

The State Board of Higher Education granted the College authority to offer its first degree, the AAS in Business Computer Applications, in July 1993. Since that time, the College has added the Associate of Arts, the Associate of Arts in Teaching, and additional Associate of Applied Science degrees.

The College has grown physically from two instructional and office buildings to a campus with four buildings and two more on the drawing board. Mid-South has come a long way physically since it had to "borrow" science laboratories and classroom space at West Memphis High School during evening hours. Both of the original buildings have

been fully renovated, along with a former tractor dealership which now houses classrooms and offices across the highway from the original campus. The most recent addition was the grant-funded 64,000-square-foot Donald W. Reynolds Center, which houses the library, student support services, admissions and records, finance, bookstore, and a small café. A new classroom building is now being planned for the main campus, even as a commercial building on the other side of town is being converted into a regional technology center where area high school students can begin their post-secondary education.

The student body, like the general population, is divided almost equally between black and white, with minimal representation of other ethnic or racial groups. Women outnumber men nearly two to one, and the average age is 27. Almost 90% of degree-seeking students require remediation in one or more areas before they can undertake college-level work, and about 70% receive some form of financial aid. A growing number of students attend only part-time, now reaching almost 75%.

Statement of the Problem/Initiative

As is increasingly the case in all states, the Arkansas Legislature and the state's Department of Higher Education are concerned about campus productivity as shrinking public funds are proposed and appropriated to each institution. In the mid-1990s, the Department created a productivity model and applied it to distribute relatively small cash awards. Their creation, however, created widespread discontent as evidence accumulated to indicate that institutional enrollment played a greater role in this special funding than did any true productivity, and the plan was dropped. Although the state continues to talk

about productivity funding, declining state revenues over the past few years have prevented actual implementation of any plan.

Mid-South Community College, however, has not waited on the state. After the earlier state-wide productivity measures were rejected, we created our own set of measures and tied performance directly to employee compensation. Over time, measures have been changed and redesigned in keeping with strategic emphases. Whereas the earlier plan—like most state-wide productivity funding models—affected, to a small extent, institutional funding, our plan affects compensation for a large group of employees, thus creating much greater personal interest in understanding institutional productivity and continuously working to improve it.

Design

The earliest version of the Productivity Plan was created largely by administrators, who selected nine areas of emphasis (Student Access, Student Goals, Student Retention, Student Satisfaction, Student Exit Performance, Workforce Placement, Transfer Placement, Administrative Efficiencies, and Community Partners) and associated measures. The last four of these, however, were never measured because of difficulties in collecting reliable data. All five areas which were measured involved students, certainly the most important group for any institution of higher education to be concerned with, but still not the only people involved in the College's productivity.

After completing a strategic planning initiative in Spring 2002 which resulted in four goals tied to the concept of the Learning College, we undertook a complete redevelopment of our Productivity Plan so that each strategic goal was supported by

related productivity measures. This time, the new plan was created by the Planning and Institutional Effectiveness Committee. Members came from a more inclusive range of employees, including the Executive Vice President, three Vice Presidents, two Deans, four Directors, a classified staff member, and a faculty member. The new plan was submitted to the Board of Trustees for approval, was pilot tested last year, and has been implemented for the current academic year.

Besides creation by a broader group, the revised Plan is much more closely tied to institutional planning, with all measures directly related to the College's four Strategic Goals. Measures underscore the importance of Learning College principles and examine actual outputs, and the points available convey the importance of each goal. Goal I, with 25 points possible, relates to access, including recruiting, enrolling, and retaining increasing numbers of students. Associated productivity measures include headcount enrollments in both non-credit and for-credit programs and fall-to-fall retention of degree-seeking students.

Goal II, with 40 points possible, stresses improvements in student learning, and productivity measures cover success in completing developmental courses and making successful transitions from developmental English/Reading and developmental mathematics to college-level English Composition and algebra courses. Other measures of student learning include end-of-program performance on a variety of standardized certification and assessment instruments, such as ACT's CAAP tests for students in the Associate of Arts program; A+, Cisco, and Certified Internet Webmaster certifications in the Information Technology program, and the GED test for the Adult Education program.

Goal III, with 10 points possible, stresses provision of a comprehensive and responsive learning support system that helps students identify and achieve their goals. Measures include circulation of library materials and student use of services provided by the College's Learning Success Center, which offers individual and group tutoring, counseling, advising, computer-aided tutorials, placement and diagnostic testing, disability services, and a variety of informational workshops. Neither support systems nor resource management, covered by Goal IV, were addressed by the College's original Productivity Plan.

The final Goal, worth 25 points, covers effective management of human, physical, and fiscal resources in support of student learning, along with promotion of a sense of community and mutual respect. Measures include availability of scholarships and financial aid compared to other Arkansas two-year colleges, ratios for Instruction & Academic Support and Student Services as percents of Net E & G (again, in comparison to our peers), the Mid-South Community College Foundation's fundraising achievements, success in obtaining grant awards, student satisfaction, and employee satisfaction.

Because 100 points are possible, the overall score translates easily into a percentage. The College each year establishes a pool equivalent to 4% of salaries for full-time non-classified employees. The percentage score for performance then determines the size of the annual bonus paid out to those employees from the pool. Last spring, the score was 70.1%, and so 70% of the 4% pool (or 2.8% of eligible employees' salaries) was paid out in addition to an across-the-board cost-of-living raise. A year earlier, the productivity bonus was the only increase non-classified employees realized,

as funding cuts prevented the president from giving any raises that would become part of the employees' pay base.

For last spring's pilot project testing the validity of the new plan, the College gathered the requisite data, resulting in a score of 71% and setting baselines for full implementation this year. In one area, student use of Learning Center services, desired data were not available, so a new sign-in procedure was instituted during the year so that change could be measured from that baseline. Results were shared with all employees so that everyone is now aware of areas most in need of improvement—especially non-credit enrollments, success on the CAAP and GED tests, and growth in Foundation donors and gifts. These results also informed several of this year's Operational Planning Objectives, such as offering more non-credit courses in off-campus locations, providing more faculty-led tutoring in English and math, and increasing the number of Foundation donors by 25%. Because improved results in one area can affect compensation for all eligible employees, interest in improvement spreads beyond the area with implementation responsibility, encouraging employees outside those areas to assist in making improvements. Examples can be seen in faculty involvement in tutoring in the Learning Success Center this year, when formerly all tutoring was handled by LSC staff, and in increased employee participation in a Foundation fundraising event this fall.

Creation and implementation of the new Productivity Plan did not require additional personnel or capital equipment purchases, and it involved only relatively simple programming changes to collect some information using the College's electronic resources (primarily, creating a new log-in system for the LSC). The main resource consumed in the creation and associated data-collection processes was employee time.

The Planning/IE Committee met repeatedly to discuss and select meaningful and relevant measures, test these measures, and then refine or redevelop them. The College also purchased the latest edition of Dr. John Minter's *Management Ratios* for two-year colleges to permit comparison with its in-state peer group on three areas of fiscal performance.

Implementation

Implementation requires a full year to create the plan, gather pilot data, and make necessary adjustments to measures. It is helpful to begin with some particular standards in mind, whether those might be strategic goals for the institution, state priorities for higher education, or externally-mandated productivity measures. Whatever an institution chooses, those involved in the process should expect several false starts and a wide diversity of opinion about the measures themselves should be and what numbers should be attached to them.

Is for-credit enrollment really more important than non-credit enrollment? Is enrollment more important than retention? Which support services are most important and how can they be measured? Do we want to meet or exceed our peers' performance in spending on instruction or the national averages for the math part of the CAAP test? If we can't meet a particular benchmark, should we get some credit for improving over the previous year's performance? On several of our measures, we created alternate ways to earn points, either by exceeding a benchmark or by making progress toward achieving the benchmark.

If we say 10 points are available on a particular measure, should we not then have ten increments (rather than two or five or whatever) so that every single point that's possible can be awarded? This question arose on our very first measure, growth in headcount enrollment. We made this worth 10 points and then set up a scale with 2-point increments, prompting a committee member to ask why it wouldn't be possible to earn 3 or 7 or 9 points—a good question and one with no good answer except, first, that the plan takes up more pages when every scale shows a way to earn every point and, second, that it's easier for whoever is drafting the measures to have fewer levels to calculate.

It is also helpful to involve employees from throughout the institution. Participants should include those with supervisory responsibilities; those who understand both the extent and the limitations of data collection on campus; those actively engaged in institutional assessment, planning, and budgeting; and those who interact directly with students, whether in the classroom or in supporting areas. If productivity measures are tied only to student outcomes, as important as those are, vital areas of institutional responsibility will be ignored, to the eventual detriment of the whole enterprise.

Benefits

As previously noted, a major benefit is raising employee awareness of and support for activities that contribute to institutional effectiveness and productivity. The productivity bonuses contribute to job satisfaction and morale for the full-time non-classified employees who make up over 70% of our total workforce (state personnel regulations unfortunately do not permit payment of bonuses to classified staff).

The Productivity Plan underscores the importance of our current Strategic and Operational Plans and stimulates more widespread participation in tasks which contribute to our ability to achieve our productivity goals. Greater attention to those goals then means we have a better chance of enrolling and retaining more students, seeing our largely under-prepared and at-risk student body succeed, managing our limited resources wisely, and keeping our constituents happy. Increased enrollment and retention also eventually translate into increased state funding, thus providing us with more resources to continue pursuing our mission.