Assessment *in* Practice

From the First Day of the First Class, to the Last Day of the Last Class: Ensuring a Pathway of Critical Core Skill Attainment for Community College Students

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A CRITICAL CORE PURPOSE

From the first day of the first class through to the last class of a program, Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) seeks to ensure that students gain the critical core skills required for personal, academic and professional success. Our mission as a community college requires that we prepare students for a variety of opportunities: transfer to a four-year college, attainment of a degree that provides entry into the workforce, attainment of credentials that support current/future employment, and/or development of other personal/civic skills. Nationally, approximately 45% of all undergraduates are enrolled in a community college (AACC, 2016); roughly a third transfer to four-year institutions (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). The remainder work towards a variety of credentials, including certificates, diplomas, and associate degrees. Regardless of the student's purpose for attending the college, CPCC recognizes a common set of critical skills (communication, critical thinking, personal growth & cultural literacy, and information technology & quantitative literacy), supported by and aligned with research regarding employer priorities (Hart Research Associates, 2013) which are required for all aspects of student success.

Historically, such skill development has been the domain of general education requirements. The "problem" for community colleges is that general education requirements tend to be limited to a small number of courses. For example, at CPCC, within a typical associate degree program, a student will complete only six general education courses. While we know that the technical courses also encourage the development of such skills, our college did not have a formal model that aligned the goals of general

education with the goals of technical associate degree programs, nor a strategic process to document and assess said skill attainment across programs of study.

Central Piedmont Community College's CRITICAL CORE Initiative established an explicit pathway between general education offerings and technical courses in order to provide our students with a clear route to acquisition of our faculty-determined, program-level student learning outcomes based upon the four CRITICAL CORE competencies. Beginning in the summer of 2015, with the engagement of over 150 faculty and staff members, we developed the CRITICAL CORE model. The model ensures that each course at the college is strategically aligned with a specific CRITICAL CORE competency. The competencies are explicitly articulated as a key indicator/learning outcome for each course, and the mapping of competencies and key indicators across courses within a program ensures a pathway of exposure to each competency area (www.cpcc.edu/criticalcore).

A CRITICAL CORE MODEL

The CRITICAL CORE pathway identifies five distinct key indicators/learning outcomes for each CRITICAL CORE competency, and ensures graduates with exposure to at least two key indicators per competency. The General Education Foundation (29 courses available for completion of general education requirements) provides opportunity for exposure to one key indicator per competency, and the mapping of remaining key indicators in all remaining program courses ensures students are exposed to a minimum of one additional key indicator per competency area. Beyond this requirement, programs of study may determine, based upon specific degree attributes, the remaining mapping of courses to competencies, thus ensuring flexibility to emphasize particular skills deemed more important for a degree/career.

CRITICAL CORE Key Indicators (learning outcomes) for each competency provide measurable criteria for teaching, learning, and assessment. They also provide an institutional expectation for attainment of proficiency. Taken together, they provide a breadth of skills per competency and a common language across courses and programs in regard to attainment of student skills. The key indicators were determined by cross-disciplinary Faculty Liaison Teams, and their recommendations were based, in part, on the relationship between general education and technical degree requirements, the AAC&U VALUE rubrics (http://www.aacu.org/value), and the Degree Qualifications Profile (Lumina Foundation, 2014).

CRITICAL CORE Signature Rubrics (common rubrics specific to a key indicator) provide a consistent measure of student proficiency across courses, programs, and the institution. These rubrics also provide faculty a common language across courses and programs in regard to attainment of student skills and represent modified excerpts of AAC&U VALUE rubrics (www.cpcc.edu/criticalcore). Utilizing "general" rubrics across courses and programs articulates a common expectation in regard to the attainment of student skills and a consistent language and expectation to students in regard to the benefits of courses, beyond course-specific and programspecific learning outcomes. CRITICAL CORE Signature

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Assignments (common assignments specific to a course and used across all section offerings of that course) provide a reliable standard for evaluating skill attainment. Determined through faculty participating in modified "Charrettes" Workshops (Hutchings, Jankowski, & Ewell, 2014) these assignments ensure an authentic assignment of high quality and consistent teaching, learning and assessment strategies.

A CRITICAL CORE ASSESSMENT AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The CRITICAL CORE ensures that students, upon completion of a program of study, will be exposed to a minimum of two key indicators per CRITICAL CORE competency. Because the Critical Core relies on both general education and technical courses to achieve its goals, a multilevel assessment and improvement process plan was devised. The General Education Foundation assessment and improvement process focuses on the specific key indicators aligned with the 29 general education courses. Our bi-annual review of Programs of Study focuses on those key indicators available for the technical courses that comprise each Program of Study. A compilation of student scores on Signature Assignments, utilizing Signature Rubrics, will gauge student attainment of CRITICAL CORE skills and provide a basis for assessment. Interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary faculty reviews of student work (CRITICAL CORE signature assignments) will provide a basis for an improvement plan.

An interdisciplinary faculty validation process gauges how well the college establishes consistent expectations of skill development across courses, disciplines, and programs. An intradisciplinary faculty validation process, utilizing discipline-specific faculty teams, gauges how well disciplines establish consistent expectations and skill development. Both provide faculty opportunity to discuss the student score analysis, and consider variables influencing skill attainment. The student score analysis and faculty reviews will identify benchmark status as well as overall strengths and weaknesses culminating in recommendations for improvement. Recommendations will encompass and value changes at the course, discipline, and institutional level. Improvement strategies aligned with instructional strategies (for example, how faculty may better articulate or role-model a skill) will become the shared responsibility of faculty and the Office of Professional Development. Improvement strategies suggestive of model/process changes (for example, changes to a competency alignment, signature assignment or signature rubric) will be referred to appropriate faculty-led groups for discussion, modification and consensus. Central to the assessment and improvement process is the fundamental purpose of the CRITICAL CORE: identifying and ensuring each course is aligned with and provides opportunity for student attainment in a critical core skill, and that alignment of said skills are strategically embedded within a program of study.

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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