



# Transparency Drives Learning at Rio Salado College

July 2011

Vernon Smith

No doubt about it, higher education is under greater scrutiny. Such scrutiny is especially intense in the case of predominantly on-line academic programs. Documenting what students are learning and making that evidence transparent are common challenges. These expectations may only increase as higher education looks for cost-effective solutions to access, retention and completion at both the institutional level and the program level.

Here is one concrete example. Rio Salado College is a Maricopa Community College located in Tempe, Arizona with over 62,000 students, 42,000 of whom are online learners. Here, publicly providing program level student learning outcomes has been a high priority. Louis Menard made plain the urgency of this priority in his *New Yorker* article by asking, *"Are people actually learning anything?"* And I would add, *"How do we know?"* My involvement with Transparency by Design has often helped answer these questions along with the call for greater accountability.

Transparency by Design (TbD) was founded by the President's Forum, a collaboration of primarily online, adult-serving institutions and programs that are regionally accredited. The TbD website, *College Choices for Adults*, was developed by WCET (WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) as a third-party reviewer with the support of a Lumina Foundation grant. Transparency by Design distinguishes itself from other accountability initiatives by focusing on program-level student learning outcomes. Under the guidance of then President Linda M. Thor, Rio Salado College became a charter member. Now, with the support of President Chris Bustamante, I believe that being a part of TbD has enhanced our assessment and accountability efforts.

The first benefit of our association with TbD was developing common metrics with the other member colleges and universities. Many long and thoughtful conversations and debates with the TbD Data Working Group helped to establish valid and replicable metrics along with transparent methodologies. While some common measures and assessment instruments were available, we quickly learned that most academic disciplines were not using common instruments at the program level. This led to the determining approaches to measure the program-level outcomes. While Rio Salado College has programs with explicit competencies that must be met, we learned how to strengthen the assessment linkages and common threads throughout the courses in the program, and in capstone, portfolio, practicum or other holistic assessments toward the end of the program. Student learning outcomes became more explicit for our faculty, students and community advisory boards.

Sharing our results publicly became the next benefit. If the desired data were available, we were ready to post our outcomes. To date, Rio Salado College has published 23 certificates and degrees. All programs and degrees are scheduled to be publicly reported with the same common metrics that TbD requires. When the desired data were not

# Viewpoint

[www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org)

present, such as the case of a new program or a program that needed improvement, we began collecting the student learning outcome metrics for future publication. We built in processes and systems to assure that future data would be collected from the start—such as an employer satisfaction survey. We also made participation in TbD a type of mini-program review: a preview process of a full program review cycle. Having a department chair, the dean and the faculty determine whether they were ready to publish data drove home the need to prepare for a full program review that would be forthcoming.

Preparing student learning outcomes for publication on the College Choices for Adults website made us look at how we reported the same metrics on our College public web-pages and in our internal networks. Students could quickly understand what they were expected to learn in the program. Advisors had better information to help guide students in their educational pathways. When the new rulemaking on public disclosure of gainful employment required information such as time requirements and costs, the revised program web-pages became a natural link for DOE, the students, and the public.

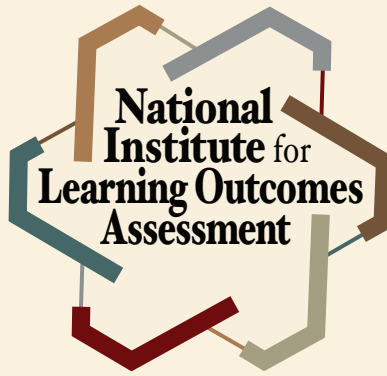
Finally, participation in TbD aligned well with our quality assurance and “relentless improvement” efforts through the Higher Learning Commission’s Academy for Assessment of Student Learning. TbD helped us take our program review, accountability, and institutional integrity efforts to a deeper and more deliberate approach. This alignment created a laser-focused attention to ensure that we did not unnecessarily duplicate similar efforts, and reinforced a “systems approach” as a college.

There is no doubt that we will experience increased scrutiny in higher education for greater transparency and accountability. In my experience, publicly sharing program-level outcomes through participation in Transparency by Design is one response that addresses questions of quality and advances the assessment of real student learning outcomes.

## References

Menand, L. (2011, June 6). What is college good for? *The New Yorker* , pp. 74-79.

Transparency by Design distinguishes itself from other accountability initiatives by focusing on program-level student learning outcomes.



### Please Cite As:

---

Smith, V. (2011, July). *Transparency drives learning at Rio Salado college*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

---

Follow us on social media:



@NILOA\_web



@LearningOutcomesAssessment

Sign up to receive our monthly **NILOA Newsletter** and stay up to date with our research and publications.

