

PLANNING STORY

Planning at Mesa Community College

Integrated and Informed for Our Improvement

by Matt Ashcraft and Craig Jacobsen

Within the span of a year, it's possible to make significant progress toward achieving and institutionalizing integrated planning and budgeting.

THE BIG PICTURE

IN AN ERA OF HEIGHTENED ACCREDITATION expectations, declining resources, and increasing competition, tools such as integrated planning and budgeting, evidence-based decision-making (EBDM) processes, an overarching continuous quality improvement (CQI) framework, and up-to-date technology solutions for managing planning processes are no longer optional. With over 300 residential faculty, nearly 600 adjunct faculty, and 350 administrative and professional support staff serving over 30,000 credit students annually, the scale of these non-negotiables is big at Mesa Community College (MCC).

While MCC has a long history of planning, the integration of planning and budgeting was limited and our planning system was outdated (as in beyond end-of-life outdated). Additionally, planning and budgeting processes lacked EBDM practices and an overarching CQI framework. MCC's Strategic Planning Committee set about remedying all these issues and did so within the span of a year! This article describes how we did it.

We started with the end in mind and developed the following desired outcomes:

- » Integrate planning and budgeting processes and procedures and ensure planning and budgeting practices meet accreditation standards

- » Incorporate EBDM and CQI processes into planning and budgeting
- » Identify and implement a new technology solution for planning

In other words, we needed to fix “stuff,” improve “stuff,” and align “stuff.” Does this sound familiar to your institution? Before getting into the nuts and bolts of our process we want to offer a few “global” tips to consider when setting out to manage such seemingly large-scale changes:

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- » *As noted above, start with the end in mind.* What are your desired outcomes? If you don't have a sense for what your new planning and budgeting world needs to look like at the end of your change process, how can you develop a plan for getting to that world?
- » *Know your audience and culture.* Time and again we sit at conferences with colleagues from across the country and hear, “That would never work at our institution.” And to that we say, “Well, at least you know your audience.” And we mean that sincerely. From what we offer here, you should take the pieces and parts that might work within your institution's context, culture, and audience and leave the rest alone! Our plan incorporated enough time to hold focus groups with

deans and department managers because our campus culture relies heavily on inclusivity in developing solutions to college challenges.

- » *Whenever possible, incorporate change into existing processes or structures.* As mentioned previously, MCC has a long history of planning. We identified planning as the existing structure and process into which we would incorporate EBDM and CQI principles. We also identified existing budgeting timelines with which to align our planning timeline in order to ensure that planning informed budgeting.

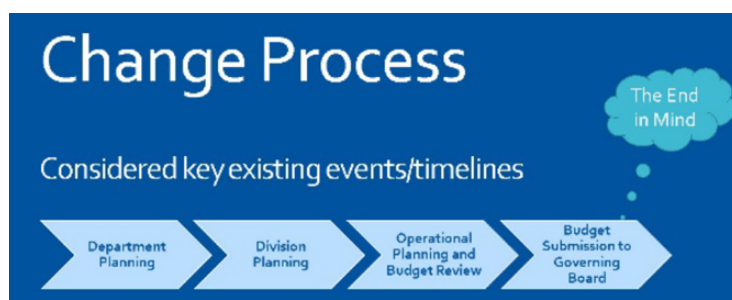
THE NUTS AND BOLTS

As dean of institutional analysis and planning and faculty co-chair of the Strategic Planning Committee, we worked to engage the committee in evaluating our planning and budgeting processes against internal feedback about what wasn't working (thank you, college planners!), best practices for integrating planning and budgeting activities (thank you, Society for College and University Planning!), and criteria for accreditation (thank you, Higher Learning Commission!).

MAJOR CHANGE #1

To ensure that college planners had adequate time to develop annual plans and that there was enough time for their plans to inform budgeting, we sequenced the major components of the planning and budgeting process with the end in mind: budget submission to the Governing Board (figure 1).

Figure 1 **MCC's Outcomes-Focused Change Process**



While that probably seems like a “no-brainer,” it is often easy to miss the obvious unless you take the time to step back and evaluate processes and procedures with an outcomes focus. This change also helped ensure that our planning and budgeting efforts were better aligned and that planning informed budgeting, hence demonstrating evidence of meeting accreditation criteria.

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MAJOR CHANGE #2

For several years the college had focused on EBDM and CQI as parts of a major quality initiative. To ensure that these efforts didn't die or become “yet another thing” through initiative fatigue and instead were scaled and sustained, we modified our department plan template to include what became internally branded as “informed improvement” (ii). ii is a combination of steps and processes that department planners, college committees, and major institutional initiatives use to make sure that EBDM and CQI processes are integrated into their plans and work (figure 2). It all starts with identifying a need or asking a question like “What variables most impact student success in English 101?” Once a need or question is established, planners can move on to researching the matter and identifying options for addressing it. Historically, this research involved bringing back a strategy or program idea from a professional conference—and that was it. While conferences can provide great ideas, fully vetting those ideas to ensure they can work at MCC has become crucial. Planners work with the college's Institutional Effectiveness department to collect and analyze data in order to inform, to the extent possible, what the best strategy might be. Once the research has helped identify the best way forward, one moves to the planning for implementation step. Strategies can often fail because a sense of urgency leads to skipping this step. After a solid plan is in place, the next step is to take action but only if a method for measuring impact

has been established by operationally defining what initiative success would look like and key performance metrics have been developed. The final step, before moving through the entire EBDM/CQI process again, is to take the time to assess impact by analyzing the initiative’s performance metrics. This analysis informs the future direction of the initiative by answering questions like “Has the initiative had any impact?” and “Do we need to change directions or dump the initiative altogether?” Depending on the answers, this step naturally leads to moving a modified or possibly new initiative back through the process, truly making it continuous.

Figure 2 “Informed Improvement” Process



MAJOR CHANGE #3

When your IT support person tells you they would rather use Excel spreadsheets for planning than continue trying to support an end-of-life technology tool, you might have a problem. And we did indeed have a problem. Without pouring a major amount of time and energy (read \$money\$) into our legacy planning system, there would be no way to support major changes 1 and 2 above. However, rather than modify the legacy system or build from scratch, we decided to seek out a higher-education technology partner with the ability to host a planning solution. Remember those focus groups

with campus planners we mentioned? While we used those groups throughout the process to vet the Strategic Planning Committee’s recommended changes, they were also crucial in vetting solutions from numerous vendors, allowing a group of end users to look inside products they could potentially end up using in the future. In the end, the solution that checked the most boxes on our “must do” and “want” lists was the Campus Labs planning solution (part of the Campus Labs for Institutional Effectiveness solution). Our requirements included but were not limited to

- » A hosted environment
- » The ability to easily align planning items with our vision, mission, and values
- » An easy-to-use, collaborative planning environment
- » Semi-customizable content
- » Robust reporting capabilities

Implementation went smoothly: it took only three months from issuing the purchase order to end users logging in for the first time. Campus Labs’ implementation and support teams were and continue to be incredibly responsive. With customizable pages, numerous fields and data types to choose from, and the ability to easily tie department-level initiatives to division- and college-level priorities, we were able to incorporate EBDM and CQI processes as well as see how our planning efforts are related like never before.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY AND LESSONS LEARNED

And now we have arrived at our perfect world with all of our outcomes accomplished! The reality is that we did accomplish the majority of each of our outcomes in theory. Our implementation of the Campus Labs planning solution continues to evolve, and the platform continues to serve our needs well. In practice we have a ways to go in having our ii (EBDM and CQI) processes fully and properly used. A part of institutionalizing (in the good sense) the ii quality initiative was creating the position of college ii coordinator, and this

person has begun to work with campus planners on best practices related to EBDM and CQI. While we have better aligned and integrated planning and budgeting, we also have a ways to go in communicating and demonstrating to key internal college constituents that this is in fact the case. On to the next round of fixing stuff, improving stuff, and aligning stuff.

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WHAT IS INTEGRATED PLANNING?

Integrated planning is the linking of vision, priorities, people, and the physical institution in a flexible system of evaluation, decision making and action. It shapes and guides the entire organization as it evolves over time and within its community.