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Modeling Democratic Practices through General Education Reform: A Developmental Journey

By Lenore Rodicio

At Miami Dade College (MDC), the largest community college in the United States, general education is not an afterthought. The process we have used to develop the current set of general education outcomes and their related assessments is truly democratic—and, more importantly, it models the core values of communication, critical thinking, and respect for diverse opinions that we are trying to instill in our students. At MDC, we are making a systematic effort to ensure that these core values are a trademark of our graduates. Even as the national dialogue on student success continues to focus on workplace readiness, our goal as “democracy’s college” is for every graduate to become a well-informed citizen who can effectively—and actively—participate in civic *and* economic life within a diverse and globally connected environment. As our learning outcomes have evolved to address this goal, faculty, staff, and student engagement have been at the heart of our work.

First Steps

In response to the growing national conversation about accountability for student learning, MDC faculty and administrators began reviewing our general education outcomes in spring 2005. Our discussions slowly evolved to focus on a question: What learning outcomes must our students achieve in order to become effective citizens and lifelong learners?

Our initial conversations began when MDC’s president, Eduardo J. Padrón, commissioned a group of faculty and administrators to identify a more effective method of assessing students’ attainment of MDC’s general education outcomes. I was among the faculty members assigned to this group. In order to build expertise in the area of general education assessment, the team participated in the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U’s) General Education and Assessment Conference in February 2005. By the end of the conference, the team had begun to comprehend that we needed not only to develop a strong assessment plan, but also to revisit the general education outcomes themselves. The need for more relevant outcomes statements became even more apparent as the team participated in AAC&U’s Institute on General Education that May. At the institute’s conclusion, the team prepared a report for institute faculty, which we shared during a meeting with the college president, the provost, and the campus presidents after returning to MDC.

During that meeting, the college president charged the team with launching a college-wide conversation on student learning outcomes. To catalyze engagement, two faculty members collaborated with the college president to create a video that was broadcast at every campus convocation in fall 2005. That December, the then-provost for academic and student affairs appointed an official general education team, which was composed primarily of faculty to ensure that those most involved in student learning were driving the reform process.

Learning to Talk

MDC is a large institution, and the general education team realized quickly that we needed to rethink our approach to faculty engagement if we wanted to

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achieve broad participation across the institution's seven campuses and outreach centers. To this end, the team designed three critical meetings to engage faculty across the various disciplines, workforce areas, and campuses during the 2005–06 academic year. Led by an external facilitator, these meetings allowed faculty to interact not only with each other, but also with others at the college, such as student services administrators and staff, ensuring that all stakeholders participated in developing the new general education outcomes. Following these meetings, planning conversations shifted to focus on specific needs identified by stakeholders in the individual departments, disciplines, and schools. By the end of MDC's annual college-wide professional development meeting in March 2006, most disciplines had generated a preliminary list of recommended general education outcomes for adoption.

On March 31, 2006, faculty members and chairpersons from all disciplines and schools, together with MDC's academic leadership, met for a one-day General Education Summit where participants developed a preliminary list of college-wide learning outcomes. As a member of AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Campus Action Network, MDC relied heavily on AAC&U research on general education outcomes to develop this list. Between April and August 2006, the general education team acquired feedback on the learning outcomes from the college's academic leadership, as well as from surveys provided to faculty, administrators, staff, and students. We wanted to ensure that every stakeholder at MDC could honestly say that she or he had a voice in developing the final list. In September 2006, the college finalized, introduced, and approved the outcome statements using MDC's approval process for academic and student-related matters. In October, we published the final version of the outcomes (see sidebar).

While finalizing the learning outcomes, we realized that we needed to undertake a similar process to develop an effective and sustainable way of assessing students' attainment of them. Once again, MDC's president created a faculty-centered infrastructure for the project, this time by appointing a Learning Outcomes Assessment Team. Rather than adopting ready-made assessments from testing vendors, the faculty opted to create their own authentic assessment tasks and related scoring rubrics. To date, the college has conducted nine administrations of the college-wide student learning outcomes assessments. The faculty hold annual campus dialogues to discuss assessment results and their implications for teaching and learning (Pádrón 2009).

As we started integrating the outcomes into the college culture and began identifying a process for baseline assessment, we recognized the need to engage all faculty in a conversation about the new outcomes and their assessment. To this end, the general education team coordinated *General Education and Assessment: An Academic Dialogue*, a one-day faculty-led conference consisting of panel discussions on classroom and assessment techniques related to each of the outcomes. We also held parallel versions of the event for adjunct faculty at each campus. As faculty grappled with how to infuse each learning outcome into their respective courses, it became evident that we had reached a turning point in education at MDC. Ensuring that students become lifelong learners was no longer a byproduct of our academic programs, but an intentional and integral component of every faculty member's teaching strategies.

A pivotal moment in the conversation about learning outcomes, the dialogue was the first time that faculty had gathered as a whole to discuss opportunities for students to participate in civic and democratic engagement. It was simultaneously the culmination of nearly two years' worth of work and the beginning of a new culture at our institution—one that engenders the democratic values of participation, responsibility, and accountability. It not only brought the outcomes to the forefront of faculty conversations, but also launched a model that would advance many other college-wide initiatives.

Celebrating Milestones

As MDC's discussions about the general education outcomes continued, President Padrón and the college's academic leadership noted that the scope of the outcomes was such that students attained them not only through their general education courses, but through all courses they took at MDC. In September 2007,

we thus renamed the general education outcomes as the College Learning Outcomes and reorganized the general education team as a permanent Learning Outcomes Coordinating Council (LOCC).

In recognition of MDC's commitment to the College Learning Outcomes, members of the college community signed a Learning Outcomes Covenant on October 19, 2007, in a ceremony witnessed by the US Under Secretary of Education. Signatories included the college president, the chair of MDC's board of trustees, the provost for education, and representatives from the faculty, student body, and community. The covenant reaffirmed the importance of liberal learning in developing a well-informed citizenry in a global community (Padrón 2008).

Since the covenant signing, MDC's outcomes development and assessment processes have received numerous recognitions and awards, including the 2008 Award for Improving General Education from the Association for General and Liberal Studies (AGLS), the 2010 College Board Innovation Award, and the 2011 Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Award for Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes.

Leaving Home

Establishing the learning outcomes and related assessment processes was just the beginning. Next, we needed to engage the faculty in intentionally addressing the outcomes by providing meaningful learning experiences for students. MDC's faculty rose to the occasion.

Jaime Anzalotta (professor of social science), Isabel Rodriguez-Dehmer (professor of college preparatory reading), and Evelyn Rodriguez (director of student life) have designed several opportunities for developmental reading students to engage in civic life and practice leadership. One example is the African American Read-In, held at MDC's North Campus each February. In 2014, the event featured Clifton Taulbert, author of *Eight Habits of the Heart: Embracing the Values that Build Strong Communities*. Participating students from MDC and from local middle and high schools received a copy of the author's book, which they read together for several hours. Members of the Student Government Association and the developmental reading students, who had received preparatory training on how to address bullying and promote civic and social responsibility, then facilitated break-out sessions with participants. As a result of their extraordinary performance as facilitators, the students received an invitation from Clifton Taulbert to attend the twenty-fifth annual Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration, which marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement. This was an enriching experience for the students, many of whom had never traveled outside Miami before; more importantly, it offered an opportunity for students to develop their leadership skills in the areas of literacy and civic and social responsibility.

A second example of faculty leadership is a study abroad program in Indonesia offered in May 2014 by Lyle Culver (professor of architecture). This program introduced students from MDC and Chatham University to a variety of implicit and explicit cultural influences on architecture. Students visited a mosque to learn about sacred space and spatial hierarchy as well as about Islam and its religious practice. Walking the streets of Yogyakarta, students experienced life in an Indonesian city while being exposed to colonial and traditional architecture. Visiting Bali's Green School, which was built using traditional materials and building methods but also using modern organic principles and unconventional classroom designs, students learned about sustainable and integrated design practices. Over the course of the trip, students visited three host institutions, where they interacted with Indonesian students and their chaperones made every effort to share Indonesian culture and traditions. Students from both sides of the globe developed lasting memories and friendships as they began to respect each other's differences and practice religious and cultural tolerance.

Currently, MDC is participating in Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation: Difference, Community, and Democratic Thinking, an initiative codirected by AAC&U and The Democracy Commitment and sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Through this project, faculty have engaged more than 3,600 students in practicing democratic thinking in their art, humanities, philosophy, and history

courses. For example, in one activity at our Kendall Campus, students conducted research to identify African women who have been instrumental in promoting human rights; they then worked with faculty to create a forty-foot mural depicting these women's inspirational lives and struggles. MDC exhibited the mural at a major campus fundraiser to support the development of a rape crisis center in the Congo. Through this project, which combined academics and artistic expression with teamwork, civic duty, and philanthropy, students learned the powerful message that their actions can have a tangible, positive impact in the real world.

Growing Up in the Age of Completion

As we approach the tenth anniversary of MDC's College Learning Outcomes, we do so in an educational context that is ever more focused on completion. Critics of the completion agenda argue that calls for structured pathways with very specific career foci will lead institutions to neglect students' general education. Yet, research shows that community college students are more successful when placed in a structured program with a clear course sequence (Jenkins and Cho 2013). With their missions of providing access to college and preparation for the workforce, community colleges are caught in the middle of the debate. For a community college like MDC—dedicated to liberal learning, but also to student success—the challenge is to create more structured pathways that still provide ample opportunities for students to attain broad learning outcomes. The best approach to this challenge lies in the very process that yielded MDC's learning outcomes: faculty engagement.

As a Completion by Design college, MDC began a process of self-study in 2012 to identify barriers to student success. Cross-campus, cross-functional interdisciplinary teams consisting of more than two hundred faculty members, administrators, and staff identified the lack of structured programs as one of those barriers. To address this issue, MDC established the Undergraduate Pathways Planning (UPP) group. This team of twenty-seven faculty from every discipline and workforce program developed a process to generate collegial, cross-disciplinary conversations focused on identifying key courses that might be integral to new pathways in selected programs. As a starting point for their conversations, UPP faculty established some ground rules, noting that pathways must (1) satisfy all State of Florida common prerequisites for transfer; (2) satisfy all general education requirements; (3) provide opportunities for students to attain workforce program outcomes; and (4) provide opportunities for students to attain all ten of MDC's College Learning Outcomes (Rodicio, Mayer, and Jenkins, forthcoming). Coupled with more intentional academic advising on entry, these standards for pathway development should provide a more solid framework not just for completion, but also for learning outcomes attainment.

AAC&U's Developing a Community College Student Roadmap project has provided additional support for outcomes-rich student pathways. MDC established our Roadmap to Completion pilot program to connect faculty, students, and student affairs staff using our existing academic progress alert and intrusive advising systems to promote student achievement. Through the Roadmap pilot, we addressed students' academic and life issues and reinforced the college's student learning outcomes by helping students develop an individualized education plan; offering tutoring referrals; engaging students in service learning, internships, and student organizations; and providing a host of high-impact support services.

The first cohort of students enrolled in structured pathways will begin graduating in 2015. When these students participate in the college-wide learning outcomes assessment process in spring 2015, we expect to see not only a jump in completion rates, but also higher attainment of learning outcomes than in prior years. With any luck, our assessment results will settle the debate over whether structured pathways can produce the broad learning outcomes associated with liberal learning.

A Personal Note from One of the "Parents"

I have had the privilege of witnessing the development of our learning outcomes from the very first meeting in February 2005. Throughout the entire enterprise, I have been struck by the way the outcomes design process itself engendered the very values of communication, democratic participation, and ethical practice that

we are attempting to instill in our graduates. Because it was built on a solid foundation, the process has resulted in a curricular product that is embraced by the institution as a whole. The sense of shared ownership has resulted in rich teaching and learning experiences that are educating the leaders of tomorrow.

Miami Dade College General Education Outcomes

Through the academic disciplines and cocurricular activities, General Education provides multiple, varied, and intentional learning experiences to facilitate the acquisition of fundamental knowledge and skills and the development of attitudes that foster effective citizenship and lifelong learning. As graduates of Miami Dade College, students will be able to

1. Communicate effectively using listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills;
2. Use quantitative analytical skills to evaluate and process numerical data;
3. Solve problems using critical and creative thinking and scientific reasoning;
4. Formulate strategies to locate, evaluate, and apply information;
5. Demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultures, including global and historical perspectives;
6. Create strategies that can be used to fulfill personal, civic, and social responsibilities;
7. Demonstrate knowledge of ethical thinking and its application to issues in society;
8. Use computer and emerging technologies effectively;
9. Demonstrate an appreciation for aesthetics and creative activities;
10. Describe how natural systems function and recognize the impact of humans on the environment.

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