Define Goals and Identify Gaps

Identify the Gaps between the Goals and Current State and Determine the Root Causes of those Gaps

Prerequisites

- Best Practice in Community College Budgeting, 2A — Develop Goals to Guide the Budgeting and Planning Process

Key Points

- A college should perform a root cause analysis to find the underlying cause of the gap between its actual and desired level of performance (as identified in the goal-setting process). Two easy tools for conducting a root cause analysis are “the 5 whys” and cause-and-effect diagrams.

- A root cause analysis should focus on issues that have the greatest impact and that a college is most able to influence through its actions. This best practice suggests potential categories of root causes that colleges should consider: organizational capacity, integrated support for students, adequate support for remedial students, instructional program coherence, choice architecture, physical plant, and measurement systems.

Related Award Program Criteria

- Criterion 2.B.1: Root Cause Analysis (Mandatory). The applicant has conducted root cause analysis on the gaps between its goal state and current state as evidenced by an example of the root cause analysis that is clearly related to one or more of the applicant’s goals submitted with the supplementary materials. The applicant explains how it conducted its analysis and what it learned generally in the award application.
Introduction
After a community college identifies its desired level of student achievement and/or other goals (e.g., a condition related to a critical support of student achievement, such as professional capacity or integrated support for students), through goal setting, it may find that there is a gap between its current level of performance and its desired level of performance. A college should further investigate this gap to discover its root cause. Root cause analysis is a method of problem solving that looks beyond symptoms to find the underlying cause of a problem. By finding root causes, a college can develop the most effective, long-lasting solutions.

This best practice describes:
I. The rationale for root cause analysis.
II. Categories of potential root causes of underperformance.

I. The Rationale for Root Cause Analysis

Background. Root cause analysis seeks to go beyond symptom-level solutions to problems to find the underlying causes of the problems or deficiencies being observed. With an understanding of the root cause of the problem, a college can develop the most effective and enduring solutions. Further, going through a structured root cause analysis can lead to surprising findings — findings that may differ from initial assumptions. Finally, the process of root cause analysis requires those with differing perspectives on the problem to come together to perform the analysis. This collaboration is the starting point for developing a broad base of support for the solutions to be developed.

Recommendation. A college should systematically identify the root causes of the gaps between its current level of performance and desired level of performance.

II. Categories of Potential Root Causes of Underperformance

Background. A root cause analysis can start with a “blank slate,” or an open consideration of possible causes, but it is often helpful to consult standard categories of potential causes of underperformance for the sake of comprehensiveness.

Recommendation. This best practice presents standard categories of root causes of underperformance for community colleges. Not every category will prove useful for every problem analyzed, so colleges need not devote equal attention to each category.

- Organizational capacity. Includes supports for professional development to improve teaching and job skills, levels of faculty and staff engagement, and talent acquisition practices.
- Integrated support for students. Addresses the structure of programs of study, such as clearly defined core elements, sequencing requirements, and where applicable, corresponding electives. This also includes non-academic supports such as advising and academic goal-setting, orientation, and development of college success skills.
- Adequate support for remedial students. Addresses the structure of the remediation program, methods to accelerate remedial learners through basic skills and into college-level coursework, and contextualization of basic skills in order to increase learning.
- **Instructional program coherence.** Addresses the extent to which a set of interrelated programs for students and staff exist that are guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and learning climate, and that are pursued over a sustained period of time. All aspects of a college’s programs and services — including orientation and intake, placement testing, remediation, curriculum, instruction, assessment, academic support, and so on — should be well-integrated and aligned to achieve program-level learning goals.

- **Choice architecture.** A large body of research indicates that too many complex choices can lead to indecision, procrastination, self-doubt, and paralysis. Choice architecture addresses the extent to which the college has simplified bureaucratic procedures (such as registering for classes and applying for financial aid) and offered students a more limited set of program options in order to mitigate self-sabotaging behaviors.

- **Physical plant.** Addresses the condition, location, and layout of physical facilities, the functionality of equipment and technology, and the adequacy of other learning aids (e.g., textbooks).

- **Measurement systems.** Addresses the measurement systems used to gauge the state of the problem. For example, the measurement system might not provide an accurate gauge or it influences the subject of the measurement to behave differently than it would otherwise.

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Endnotes

1 See GFOA Best Practice in Community College Budgeting, 2A – Develop Goals to Guide the Budgeting and Planning Process.

2 The Achieving the Dream program recommends the use of root cause analysis as a key part of a college’s efforts to optimize student achievement. See the “Field Guide for Improving Student Success” available at achievingthedream.org.

3 The categories are derived primarily from Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Q. Easton, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). However, it should be noted that Bryk, et al. do not distinguish between “primary” and “secondary” causes in their “5 essential supports” of student learning that the root cause categories were largely drawn from. Further, the GFOA added to this the categories of “physical plant” and “measurement systems” to account for root cause categories that the inventor of cause-and-effect diagrams, Kaoru Ishikawa, believed are generally applicable to all applications of root cause analysis.

4 See GFOA Best Practice in Community College Budgeting, 3B — Develop Strategies.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.