

Building a Scaled Culture of Continuous Improvement in Teaching & Learning at Southwest Wisconsin Technical College



Photo courtesy of Southwest Wisconsin Technical College

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Introduction

The biennial Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence is rooted in intensive research on community colleges that achieve high, improving, and equitable levels of student outcomes, defined as success both in college and after graduation. One area of inquiry for the Aspen Prize is what applicants have done to advance teaching and learning. Student learning is an important area of outcomes assessed during the Aspen Prize process, both because it is a core college function and because evidence shows that improved learning can help colleges improve student retention and completion rates. But while national data reveal that community colleges have done a lot of work to improve associate degree completion rates¹—which increased by six percentage points from 2014 – 2021²—researchers and reformers have often concluded that colleges have not put the same degree of effort into improving classroom teaching and student learning outcomes.³

However, there are strong examples of institution-wide practice to advance teaching and learning, several of which Aspen documented in a guide on improving teaching and learning at community colleges.⁴ In the 2023 Aspen Prize cycle, Aspen learned of another community college—Aspen Prize finalist Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (SWTC)—that achieved strong outcomes in substantial part due to scaled improvements in faculty teaching. As described below, this technical college’s teaching and learning reform efforts are noteworthy, especially their continuous improvement system—called Team Action Plans (TAPs)—which faculty use to inform and document teaching and learning improvements across the college. Perhaps most impressive is the speed at which SWTC implemented this system after being admonished by its accreditor in 2016 for inadequate efforts to advance teaching practices.

When Aspen visited six years later, faculty could consistently cite specific improvements in student learning in their courses from semester to semester and year to year. College leaders believe these reforms helped the college increase its combined graduation and transfer rate by 10 percentage points, from 51 percent in 2015 to 61 percent in 2021. This rate is 14 percentage points higher than the national average.⁵

1. Jonathan Gyurko, Penny MacCormack, Martha Bless, and Jacqueline Jodi, “Why Colleges and Universities Need to Invest in Quality Teaching More Than Ever”, (November 2016), <https://acue.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ACUE-White-Paper1.pdf>.
2. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Graduation Rates component final data (2014 - 2020) and provisional data (2021).
3. Charlene Nunley, Trudy Bers, and Terri Manning, “Learning Outcomes Assessment in Community Colleges”, (July 2011), <http://niloa.limereddev.com/documents/OccasionalPaper10.pdf>.
4. Aspen College Excellence Program, “Building a Faculty Culture of Student Success”, (2014), <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/files/content/docs/pubs/BuildingaFacultyCulture.pdf>.
5. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Graduation Rates component final data (2015-2021).

Never Waste a Crisis

In 2016, SWTC was in an unenviable position. The college had recently experienced its second presidential transition in five years, and its new president, Jason Wood, was facing a substantial budget shortfall and sharp enrollment declines. Soon after his arrival, the college received more bad news: a negative accreditation review from the Higher Learning Commission ordered ongoing monitoring of the college due to a lack of evidence that SWTC and its faculty used data to improve student outcomes.⁶ In particular, accreditors found that SWTC's leaders were not interrogating their student learning data, that course planning lacked clear direction, and that faculty were not held accountable for instructional quality. In addition, each program or course was assessed on a three-to-five-year cycle, an interval inconsistent with a culture of continuous improvement.

When faced with similar findings, leaders of other colleges have chosen to contest accreditors' conclusions or aim to adopt the minimum reforms needed to eliminate monitoring protocols. SWTC took a different approach. President Wood and his senior leadership team used the negative review as a call to action, focusing the college on changing students' classroom experience.

The Result:

The creation of a process and culture to continuously improve student learning, backed by actionable data.

6. Higher Learning Commission, "Letter to Southwest Wisconsin Technical College", (July 2017): https://www.hlcommission.org/download/_BoardActionLetters/Southwest%20Wisconsin%20Technical%20College%20Action%20Letter.pdf.

Starting with Institutional Goals

Responding to the accreditor’s findings required an urgent, “all hands on deck” response at SWTC, according to President Wood. As a first step, college leaders set high-level goals for the institution.

- **Engage** students in high-quality learning
- **Strengthen** a culture of accountability
- **Enhance** the college’s economic impact

SWTC leaders assigned metrics to each of these goals, with specific targets for improvement. The metrics—which became known as the College Health Indicators—included well-established indicators such as graduation, retention, and job placement rates. Leaders chose these metrics because they were critical to achieving the college’s student success mission; they were quantifiable and actionable; and, finally, at least one of the goals was applicable to everyone at the college, regardless of role, position, or responsibility. But the most important target for the system was faculty, as their behavior would determine the extent to which the college would raise student learning outcomes.

Next, SWTC’s leaders searched for a system that could drive improvement across the indicators. The college reached out to peers from the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) and sent representatives to national assessment conferences to learn from exemplars. SWTC leaders were most impressed when a peer in the WTCS, Northcentral Technical College, shared information about its TAPs system.⁷ Here’s how their program works: Each department or team creates annual plans that align to the college’s high-level strategic goals and are within the team’s control. The teams are responsible for implementing these plans and evaluating their outcomes for the following year. A College Assessment Workgroup, made up of fellow staff, reviews and analyzes the TAPs in order to identify successful strategies and activities that can be shared with other programs, departments, and partners. At SWTC, senior leaders particularly liked how the TAPs system ensured that every team had manageable goals aligned to the college’s high-level strategic goals, and they set out to implement their own version.

7. Northcentral Technical College, “Strategic Plan: 2021-2024” (2020): <https://www.ntc.edu/sites/default/files/2021-03/strategic-plan-booklet.pdf>.

Building Support

For the TAPs system to work at SWTC, college leaders needed faculty and staff buy-in. To ensure this, the president and senior team led by example, setting their own goals and making them public. The fact that TAPs applied to everyone at the college—not just faculty—was important to the system’s success. When they first rolled it out, college leaders required that every employee set goals but did not attach any accountability to whether outcomes associated with goals were accomplished. One intent was that faculty could see they were not alone in their efforts to improve the college’s teaching and learning practices, and they would be emboldened by the knowledge that the college would not penalize them for setting and then missing a goal.

In addition, the college provided data inquiry training to faculty, staff, and the college’s board members so each could identify and understand areas of opportunity. Institutional research (IR) staff knew that many of their colleagues lacked experience with this kind of data and with setting quantitative or qualitative goals using these data. Additionally, IR staff developed a series of workshops and established office hours to ensure that those using the TAPs system understood the inquiry questions and background context associated with their data.

Finally, college leaders publicly celebrated success stories and continue to do so today. The college devotes three days per year to focusing on its Institutional/Instructional Vitality Process (IVP). These “IVP Days” are mandatory for all employees, and to ensure participation, everyone’s calendars are entirely blocked off. During these events, leaders present data on the college’s goals and give those who have particularly successful evidence-based strategies an opportunity to share their ideas and results.



Photo Credit: Rattankun Thongbun via Getty Images

A Detailed Look at the System

Since TAPs was instituted, core processes have evolved and crystallized. These processes are similar across programs and staff-levels, but given the focus of this case study on improving teaching and learning outcomes, the descriptions and examples below focus on faculty use.

Starting with institutional strategic goals: Before each academic year begins, the College Effectiveness Team reviews the College Health Indicators, as well as metrics on student learning. The team also studies the past year's TAPs and their contributions to the strategic goals of the college. Based on those analyses, the College Effectiveness Team works with the college's senior leaders to set quantitative institutional goals for the coming year, which inform the TAPs and themes for the college's IVP days. For instance, recent strategic goals have included efforts to improve performance on "core skills" such as workplace communication and reading comprehension or to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in campus staff and student representation.

Identifying team-level & individual plans and goals: After institutional goals are set, faculty meet in department-level teams to develop and submit a plan into the TAPs system in alignment with the college's institutional goals. After setting team-level goals, individual faculty are required to identify areas of need and room for improvement based on student outcomes data and set their own individual goals that connect to their team's TAPs. They are supported by internal facilitators trained by the college in data interpretation and analysis, who can guide teams in analyzing data to help all faculty members set measurable goals.





Faculty are given broad flexibility in setting individual goals and reform plans within these guidelines, and innovation and experimentation are encouraged. What does this look like in practice? In the example TAP sheet shown on page 8, a Lab Science Technician instructor, using the college's Learning Management System (LMS), identified that only half of the students in one of their courses passed a test tied to professional communication. The instructor decided to incorporate role-playing activities into the course's monthly lab activities to help students practice these workplace skills. Towards the bottom of the TAP sheet, the instructor identifies that their plan is aligned to the broader collegewide strategic priority of "Engaging students in high-quality learning."

In another example (not shown), a mathematics faculty member identified from prior-year data that the Chapter 5 test on graphing revealed weak learning outcomes for more than 40 percent of students in their general education math course. To respond, the faculty member shifted the course set-up to decrease lecture time and increase face-to-face work time where students could ask questions about difficult problems. While it is not hard to find similar examples of teaching adjustments at other community colleges, the scale of adoption at SWTC is notable. The college's TAPs system is structured to ensure that such analysis and planning is done by every faculty member every year.

Finalizing and publishing goals: After plans are submitted, an assessment work group of faculty and staff from across the college conducts an audit to ensure that plans are viable and include at least one element aligned to the institution's strategic direction. After the audit, every employee's goals (including those for the president and senior team members) are entered into the centralized TAP hub. Any SWTC staff member can access them, providing an additional layer of community accountability to achieve results. The hub also provides all employees with an easy-to-use repository of the college's strategic priorities, relevant data, and unified curriculum templates for faculty use.

Monitoring and evaluation: Each team meets at least three times per semester to review strategies and progress towards team goals. Everyone also submits a mid-year review, in which they identify successes and pain points on their individual goals. For instance, in the first case described above, the Lab Tech instructor recognized that some students struggled with the newly developed role-playing activity. The instructor adjusted their course to spend more time with students in these specific activities to provide additional practice.

This mid-year review is designed to be simple and focused, requiring that only a few sentences be submitted. It also includes opportunities for faculty to request additional resources and support to help them reach their goals.

When the year concludes, faculty are provided with updated data informing them of the effectiveness of their strategies. They then review their data and document the relationship between their actions and the target metric. For the Lab Tech professor, students in their course averaged 90 percent on the LMS's Mastery Tool. Similarly, the math faculty member found meaningful success from their reforms—with data showing that nine out of ten students passed the test (the remaining student was only two points from a passing grade). And as successful strategies are celebrated, faculty whose strategies do not succeed are encouraged to experiment with a new approach. Perhaps because there are no negative consequences associated with attempting a strategy and failing to meet goals, faculty express a willingness to experiment with new course structures and teaching methods.

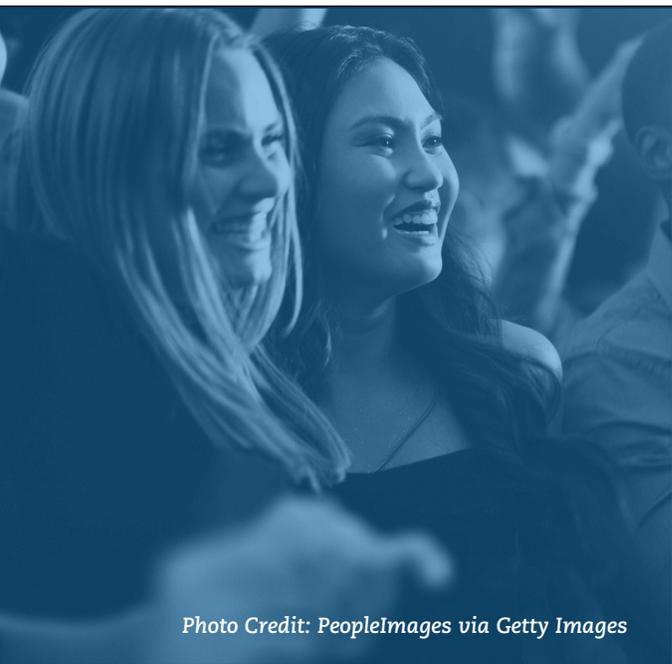


Photo Credit: PeopleImages via Getty Images

Celebrating success: At the end of each year, every employee of the college, regardless of role or level, gathers at the college's summer IVP day. At this event, all employees celebrate the college's achievements and review how they and their teams performed on their goals. This review of performance and data kicks off the next cycle of goal setting and Team Action Plan creation.

When successful, faculty and staff are encouraged by their managers to continue the strategies in future semesters. At times, they are asked how the successful strategies can be adapted for additional classes or lessons. The most successful strategies are chosen for celebration and presentation at future IVP Days.

Sample Team Action Plan

School Year	2021-2022
Program	Laboratory Science Technician
Quality Project Title	TAP #1 Strengthen Student Learning - Program Outcome: Communicate with colleagues in a professional manner.
Improvement Plan	Faculty member selected this outcome based on the program outcome mastery bridge and because it is very important in the industry. The past 2 years I have studied the laboratory safety program outcome and embedded it throughout the program learning plans. Insert role playing activities into Quality Lab Skills course to strengthen student learning.
Metric	Program Outcome Mastery Bridge Report
Initial Metric Value	50%
Goal	75%
Target Date	7/1/2022
Current Progress	Complete
Mid-Year Review	<p>Although speaking professionally to peers and instructor are always enforced in classroom activities, role playing activities have not been done yet. Instructor will make this a "station" during lab activities at least once a month during the spring semester. Instructor will set up various one-on-one role-playing activities and have the students respond. Examples of this will include a job performance review with constructive criticism and a meeting with management discussing a co-worker.</p> <p>4/14/22 Update: Students have been practicing the role-playing activities as a station in lab. Some students have found this activity more challenging than others. The instructor makes sure to help the pairs that are struggling. These activities will continue throughout the semester.</p>
Final Notes	Students were evaluated and averaged 90% on the Schoology Mastery Tool.
Status	Goal Met
Final Metric Value	90%
Strategic Priorities/College Health Indicator	2021-2022: Engage Students in High Quality Learning: Student Learning
Created	10/7/2021 3:03 PM
Created By	[Instructor Name]
Modified	8/16/2023 4:00 PM

Factors for Success

Four factors seemed to drive SWTC's success, from which other colleges can learn.

- **Goals are set and revisited multiple times per year.**
SWTC's Team Action Plans system includes several moments throughout the year when all faculty are supported by the college in setting and reviewing goals, a consistent process that helps shift the outcome assessment process from a compliance exercise to a professional activity that is built into regular practice.
- **The data system is clear and simple, and supported by expert staff.**
TAPs is designed to make institutional data available to every employee in a centralized, easy-to-access format, so that they don't need to be a data expert to identify areas of opportunity and develop strategies for continuous improvement. Trained facilitators are available to help everyone to use the data effectively.
- **Transparency and shared accountability.**
All faculty, staff, and administrators can access and monitor every user's progress on their TAPs goals, building a shared sense of accountability and responsibility.
- **Frequently communicating what works.**
While failure to engage in the process of improving student outcomes through TAPs can result in top-down accountability, SWTC leaders have focused their communications around TAPs on positive messages, highlighting those with exceptional results in multiple venues, including all-staff Institutional Vitality Days. Leaders believe that a focus on communicating what works has increased the spread of effective practices and provided a positive incentive for faculty to try to achieve better learning outcomes through better teaching practices.

Conclusion

Strong teaching practices are a critical component of excellent community colleges. Southwest Wisconsin Technical College used an accreditation crisis to introduce scaled improvements in faculty teaching with a new system of goal setting and continuous improvement. SWTC's Team Action Plans system engaged faculty and staff across the college and helped SWTC to increase its combined graduation and transfer rate by 10 percentage points over six years—a remarkable accomplishment. The college's implementation of this system serves as a model for how to introduce teaching and learning reforms that encourage innovation, build faculty buy-in, and celebrate success. The result is a broadly used system that faculty use to deliver real and measurable improvement in student outcomes, and has also helped establish a culture of shared accountability.



Photo courtesy of Southwest Wisconsin Technical College

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