ACADEMIC AUDIT REPORT
PELLISSIPPI STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES PROGRAM

Introduction

The academic audit team for the Humanities and Social Sciences program at Pellissippi State Community College visited the campus on March 18, 2014. During the visit, the team met with the following constituencies: administration; faculty; adjunct faculty and other stakeholders; and students. Faculty was well represented, and the student session was well attended; most of the students had completed at least two courses from the program. At the end of the day, the team’s findings were presented to administrators and faculty.

The Humanities and Social Sciences program encompasses history, sociology, social work, political science and philosophy. For the most part, the courses they provide are part of the general education core, although some courses meeting the requirements for Tennessee Transfer Pathway programs are also offered.

Overall Performance

This was the first academic audit for this program, and there were some issues with regard to the information provided in the self-study. The audit team often had to ask for details about components of the report when they could have been included in the report itself. The report was compiled by members of the history and sociology faculties and edited by a member of the philosophy faculty, but the team did wonder why no one from social work was officially involved in the self-study process. It was noted, however, that faculty are collegial and work in a culture that encourages the sharing of ideas across disciplines. The college supports this sharing through brown bag lunches, the Faculty Lecture Series, and other professional development activities.

Students are generally pleased with the education they are receiving and feel that the program meets their needs. They specifically identified the use of in-class group activities, which are part of the Quality Enhancement Program (QEP) for the college. They stated that these group activities make them feel more connected to one another and to faculty and that debates on difficult subjects have been good learning experiences--and well managed by faculty.

Students also noted that full-time faculty are readily available and that they encourage active participation in classes. The college offers a series of faculty lectures, which students attend. The student specifically noted the strength of their sociology classes and expressed their wish that all classes be like those.

The administration appears to be supportive of the program, although the percentage of adjunct instructors in this program is significantly higher than the college average.

Learning Objectives

The Humanities and Social Sciences program faculty work collaboratively to develop appropriate learning objectives for each discipline and recognize that these outcomes must include the TBR-mandated general education competencies for those courses that are approved and designated by TBR as meeting general education requirements. In discussion with the faculty, it became clear that many faculty were unfamiliar with the TBR requirements. While it is clear that the discipline objectives are based on what the faculty believe that students need to know, it is not surprising that discipline objectives may not clearly actually match the TBR general education competencies.

PSCC History

The History faculty has identified four clear and succinct objectives:
1. Develop the students’ awareness of major political, cultural, social, and economic developments
2. Promote students’ ability to think critically about the past
3. Prepare students for life in an increasingly global world
4. Expand students’ knowledge of how the past has shaped the present

However, appropriate these objectives may be, they do not directly match the TBR general education outcomes for History below:

Students will demonstrate the ability to

1. Analyze historical facts and interpretations.
2. Analyze and compare political, geographic, economic, social, cultural, religious and intellectual institutions, structures, and processes across a range of historical periods and cultures.
3. Recognize and articulate the diversity of human experience across a range of historical periods and the complexities of a global culture and society.
4. Draw on historical perspective to evaluate contemporary problems/issues.
5. Analyze the contributions of past cultures/societies to the contemporary world.

PSCC’s first objective partially matches TBR outcome 2. PSCC’s second objective seems to be related to TBR outcome 1. PSCC’s third objective partially fulfills TBR outcome 3. PSCC’s fourth objective is close to TBR outcomes 4 and 5. According to the TBR guidelines for their History general education outcomes, “All learning outcomes must be satisfied by any course(s) in this category.”

**PSCC Sociology**

In the meantime, the Sociology faculty has developed four excellent learning objectives for the courses in their discipline. But, even more so than History, these objectives fail to incorporate the TBR learning outcomes for approved General Education courses in Social/Behavioral Sciences.

1. Enhance students’ knowledge of the sociological imagination and the difference between personal troubles and social conditions
2. Enhance students’ understanding of major sociological paradigms (structural-functional, social-conflict, and symbolic interaction)
3. Build students’ skills to understand the scientific methods used by sociologists and how they gather information about the social world
4. Develop the students’ awareness of culture and the role of language in the transmission of culture, and enhance the students’ understanding of socialization as the process of creating social beings

**TBR Learning Outcomes:** Students will demonstrate the ability to

1. Recognize, describe, and explain social institutions, structures, and processes and the complexities of a global culture and diverse society.
2. Think critically about how individuals are influenced by political, geographic, economic, cultural, and family institutions in their own and other diverse cultures and explain how one’s own belief system may differ from others.
3. Explore the relationship between the individual and society as it affects the personal behavior, social development and quality of life of the individual, the family and the community.
4. Examine the impact of behavioral and social scientific research on major contemporary issues and their disciplines’ effects on individuals and society.
5. Using the most appropriate principles, methods, and technologies, perpectively and objectively gather, analyze, and present social and behavioral science research data, draw logical conclusions, and apply those conclusions to one’s life
6. Take ethical stands based on appropriate research in the social and behavioral sciences.
7. Analyze and communicate the values and processes that are used to formulate theories regarding the social context of individual human behavior in the social and behavior sciences.

Granted, it is important that the Sociology faculty tailor objectives specifically for Sociology, as opposed to all Social/Behavioral Sciences. And in their first, second, and fourth objectives they have done just that. The third objective partially meets TBR outcome 4. However, TBR requires that for courses to meet Social/Behavioral Sciences General Education guidelines, they must meet four or more of the TBR learning outcomes for this area.

**PSCC Political Science**

Likewise, the Political Science faculty have developed three excellent objectives for their courses:

1. Develop students’ understanding of the key concepts and ideas upon which different systems of government are based
2. Develop students’ understanding of how the political process works in different systems
3. Participate in a global world

Because POLS 201, POLS 1030, and POLS 2010 have been approved by TBR to meet General Education Social/Behavioral Sciences requirements, they must also include a minimum of four of the TBR learning outcomes for that area.

**PSCC Philosophy**

Finally, the Philosophy faculty has five excellent learning objectives for their courses. Philosophy’s third and fourth objectives are closely related to the TBR learning outcomes 4 and 6 for Humanities and/or Fine Arts. However, to meet the Humanities and/or Fine Arts General Education guidelines, at least two additional TBR learning outcomes must be included.

1. Expand students’ awareness and basic understanding of philosophy and its various branches
2. Expand the students’ knowledge of the questions/problems that have occupied philosophers during the last twenty-five centuries
3. Develop the students’ ability to think critically about traditional philosophical questions and problems
4. Foster students’ enhanced ability to think critically about various other philosophical issues
5. Build students’ academic skills to articulate ideas about philosophical issues

**TBR Learning Outcomes:** Students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. Analyze significant primary texts and works of art, ancient, pre-modern, and modern, as forms of cultural and creative expression.
2. Explain the ways in which humanistic and/or artistic expression throughout the ages expresses the culture and values of its time and place.
3. Explore global/cultural diversity.
4. Frame a comparative context through which they can critically assess the ideas, forces, and values that have created the modern world.
5. Recognize the ways in which both change and continuity have affected human history.
6. Practice the critical and analytical methodologies of the Humanities and/or Fine Arts.

**PSCC Social Work**

The objectives for the courses in Social Work appear to be appropriate and well conceived. They are also complete,
as far as this report, because Social Work courses are not approved to meet the TBR General Education requirements and are not subject to the TBR learning outcomes for Social/Behavioral Science courses.

The HSS Program at PSCC has proposed an initiative to “Institute annual program meetings to review course goals and expected learning outcomes” in order “to promote quality and consistency across the department in course delivery.” This is a worthwhile initiative and it is hoped that, in the process, the faculty will take into consideration the TBR-mandated learning outcomes for the general education courses in their disciplines.

**Curriculum and Co-Curriculum**

In the assessment of curriculum and co-curriculum, the audit team finds that the current curriculum is designed to meet the needs of students for their general education core based on TBR recommended core area requirements. Currently the HSS program has master syllabi for each course that explicitly outline learning objectives, requirements and outcomes. Faculty members appear to work collaboratively on the design of curriculum and have plans to improve oversight of the master syllabi. Faculty members expressed their intention to increase the involvement of adjunct faculty in course design and delivery.

The audit team suggests incorporating information from a variety of sources in designing the curricular practices. There did not appear to be much involvement in professional development activities outside those offered on the Pellissippi State campus, although some faculty did indicate that they attend conferences of their respective professional associations, at least at the state level. Faculty in each discipline would benefit from more interaction with their professional associations in addition to the current practices of informal consultation with University of Tennessee faculty and of using discipline-specific listservs. While this may require an increase in financial support from the administration, both the program and its faculty deserve that support.

The audit team did not find a systematic periodic review of curriculum and co-curriculum. The audit team recommends that faculty develop a clear process for annual review of course syllabi that includes consideration of both TBR learning outcomes and departmental learning outcomes.

There seem to be ample co-curricular activities including campus-based and study abroad opportunities. In particular, the sociology and history faculty are actively involved in the Tennessee Consortium for International Studies (TnCIS), which gives Pellissippi students multiple options for foreign travel and study and for interaction with their peers from other TBR institutions.

**Teaching and Learning Methods**

The self-study indicates that faculty participates in activities meant to improve the teaching and learning process. These include an annual three-day in-service and professional development activities such as the brown bag lunches that occur throughout the academic year. Faculty report that they also consult with one another about methods that have been successful. As noted earlier, more interaction with peers outside the PSCC community could lead to even more opportunities for improvement.

Among the teaching methods employed by faculty are lecture, group discussions or debates, and games. Students noted that the sociology faculty in particular encourage students to bring current events into the classroom when they relate to the subject matter; it was also noted that faculty often recommend books that relate to the course.

The sociology faculty has incorporated service learning into the assessment process in some of their courses. Students reported that they were given the option to write a research paper or to participate in service learning. For the research paper option, students must include a minimum of six sources and make an oral presentation to class. In the service learning option, students must identify a social problem and spend ten hours volunteering with an organization that
works with that specific problem. A written document is also required. This approach requires the use of multiple teaching and learning strategies and is a positive model.

One point that was made repeatedly in the self-study is that faculty use writing as a teaching and learning tool, with as much as 50% of the grading process dependent on student writing. What students told us, however, is that writing itself is not a focus. A variety of writing activities is used (research papers, take-home essay tests, responses to professional writing), but students do not have opportunity to revise or edit their work, so it is not accurate to say that faculty are “developing students’ writing skills.”

The primary source of information about the quality of teaching and learning methods appears to be use of data gleaned from student evaluations of faculty. While this can be a useful tool, it is only one tool. Since the institution already has a peer review process in place, perhaps that could be a component as well. The QEP initiative might also provide data that can be used for the improvement of teaching and learning methods.

**Student Learning Assessment**

Humanities and Social Sciences faculty have obviously put a great deal of thought and consideration into selecting the best student assessment methodologies for each discipline. Requiring at least 50% of the students’ grades in history to be determined from writing assignments is commendable, and the commitment to developing students’ writing skills could certainly be recognized as one of their discipline objectives and measured to determine success (with the caveat noted above). The wide variety of assessment techniques employed by faculty in the program is equally impressive. However, the assessments discussed in this self-study are entirely about assessment of individual student achievement in individual courses. There is no mention of any type of discipline-specific common assessment to determine whether PSCC’s own learning objectives for students in each discipline are being met—much less the TBR learning outcomes. Moreover, there is no evidence here that student learning assessments are used in any manner to assess program effectiveness or to inform any type of continuous program improvement plan.

The self-study includes a “potential recommendation” and “proposed initiative” to review the Humanities and Social Sciences program’s assessment plan in order “to assess the degree to which students are meeting course learning outcomes.” This is indeed important, and a plan must be formulated and implemented that requires the results to be compiled and analyzed in such a way as to facilitate recommendations for continuous improvement within the program and the disciplines.

**Quality Assurance**

The faculty in the Humanities and Social Sciences are committed to assuring the best possible experience and education for their students. They have participated in college- and division-sponsored professional development activities; they use a variety of teaching and assessment strategies. But as noted above, there was little indication (in the self-study) of processes designed to determine the effectiveness of those activities and strategies.

Similarly, there was little in the self-study to indicate how the quality of the program itself is assured. There was much information about faculty qualifications and the review of faculty performance, but as with the use of student evaluations in determining the quality of teaching and learning methods, this is only one component of a program quality. Faculty need to develop a process whereby multiple indicators are used to determine the quality of each disciplines course offerings/activities as well as that of the program as a whole.

The audit team feels that the matrix of improvement initiatives is a good reflection of the issues noted in this report. Each of the items in the matrix is an activity, something that can be done and “checked off” as completed, much as students complete assignments for a course. What is needed here is a set of processes, each of which will involve multiple activities or steps, that will guide the program in making decisions about the five areas they must document in these
academic audits. Thus, we have taken the somewhat unusual step of making a specific recommendation about revising the initiatives so that they meet the standard established by TBR.

**Commendations**

1. The team commends faculty for their use of D2L across all courses and also as a means of communicating and sharing between faculty.
2. The team commends the faculty for their commitment to developing appropriate QEP activities for all disciplines.
3. The team commends the Sociology faculty for the diversity and thoughtfulness of their assessment processes and activities.

**Affirmations**

1. The team affirms the incorporation of service learning into the sociology curriculum.
2. The team affirms the active participation of the philosophy faculty in the Tennessee Philosophical Association and sponsorship of the student philosophy organization.
3. The team affirms the high level of participation in TnCIS programs by members of the history and sociology faculty.

**Recommendations**

1. The team recommends that faculty develop a clear process for review of course syllabi that includes consideration of both TBR learning outcomes and departmental learning outcomes as appropriate.
2. The team recommends greater commitment to professional development beyond that provided by the institution, particularly with reference to specific professional disciplines and to knowledge of best practices in instruction.
3. The team recommends revision of the improvement initiatives presented in the self-study. These initiatives should be process-oriented, not activity-oriented, and include appropriate and specific measures to assess the success of the processes.
4. The team recommends that each discipline develop a common assessment plan to determine the extent to which their general education courses are meeting the TBR-mandated learning outcomes and to provide data for continuous improvement.
5. The team recommends that the programs work with administration to bring their percentage of adjunct instructors more into line with the institutional average.