

**Austin Community College  
Executive Summary of Strategic Focus Reports  
September, 2002**

**Overview of Process:**

Austin Community College (ACC) is a member of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the recognized accrediting agency for post-secondary institutions in the eleven southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia) and Latin America. The Commission on Colleges accredits institutions that award associate, baccalaureate, masters, specialists or doctoral degrees. Once every ten years, to prepare for re-accreditation, each member institution of SACS must undertake a self-study that involves faculty, administrators, professional/technical and classified employees, students, trustees and the community. ACC conducted a traditional self-study process in 1992. This time, the College was approved to conduct a self-study using the alternative model. Although the College still must document compliance with all the SACS *Criteria for Accreditation*, much of the energy of the self-study process is being devoted to a strategic focus.

ACC selected the following topic for its strategic focus: **“Infusing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Innovation into Learning: A Student-Centered Examination of New Technologies, Faculty Roles, and Institutional Structures.”** Several events prompted the choice of the strategic focus of ACC’s self-study, including the changing needs of the greater Austin business community, state rule changes in standardized courses, the state government guaranty of transferability of a core area of classes from a community college to a four-year state institution. Additional events, including the conclusions from an ACC initiated Citizen’s Advisory Committee in 1999 concerning the college’s role in fulfilling the needs of the Austin community, as well as more global forces such as the economy, the increased reliance on computer, internet, and telecommunications technologies, and the changing nature of the current job market also played a part.

The College has been working on strategic planning for several years. Extensive program review, including instructional units envisioning what their program of study would look like in five years, has been conducted on an ongoing basis. With input from key instructional personnel, the College community was ready to gather more information and move forward in making informed decisions about how ACC could best serve its current and future students. Ten years ahead is the targeted vision for this self-study. Four specific subtopics were identified and considered by four committees. A fifth committee focused on implementation issues arising from the recommendations of the other four committees.

In sum, several processes have culminated in an opportunity for ACC to plan for our changing student and community needs. While strategic change is often difficult and can take time, the potential for meaningful improvements is greatly increased as well. What follows is an overview of a largely faculty driven vision for the future of our college with regard to our ACC SACS Strategic Focus (SF) topic. This summary will recap issues that emerged as salient in committee discussions and reports. Three areas will be summarized; first, **Prefatory Remarks** of a broad college-wide theme; second, a **Recommendations Summary** of changes proposed by committees, and finally, **Common Questions** from discussions and reports directly related to the strategic focus.

**Prefatory Remarks**

While each committee was charged with a specific and narrow area of focus, often-recurrent themes of a broader nature dominated. These broader themes are noteworthy for at least two reasons; first, committees often thought these issues would prevent the realization of their recommendations, and second, they point to a broader “cultural” issue that could impede positive change and, therefore, warrants college-wide dialogue. Peter Bishop, of the Futures Program, University of Houston, Clear Lake, in discussions and seminars with faculty, administration and staff, suggested that a significant shift in ACC’s internal culture was essential before such changes as offered by the Strategic Focus committees could realistically be possible. This culture issue, at times characterized by cynicism and distrust among employees at all levels, was the most recurrent theme in all meetings and frequently emerged in reports too. Some include:

- Cohesiveness and collegiality among college employee groups must be fostered.

- A Commitment to engage change management consultants to help ACC change our culture is necessary.
- A long-term, systematic plan for culture change will require buy-in from employee groups, especially faculty and administrators.
- Top-down management styles typified by an outdated hierarchical structure must be replaced by more collaborative decision making with special attention paid to those who are most impacted by a given decision.
- Develop a process of follow-up or “closing the loops” in which all involved have input to assure the complete and effective integration of new initiatives and other changes.
- Meaningful shared governance should be increased at ACC.

Changing an institutional culture is no simple task. We can potentially begin by finding common ground among employees surrounding the proposed recommendations.

### **Recommendations Summary**

While it is not possible to include all recommendations here, major goals organized around the three phases of our SF are offered below. Their order does not indicate a priority system.

#### ***Phase One: Environmental Scans:***

This committee was charged with analyzing the College’s prospective students’ demographic makeup, likely entering skills and learning attributes. Of interest here was the kinds of learning and technology skills students would bring to the College. Some key findings were:

- Tremendous population growth in the Central Texas region will continue.
- Extensive growth in the diversity of the student body, especially in the Hispanic population will be seen.
- The general population is aging, and increased numbers of non-traditional older students will attend the College.
- Economic disparity will become more pronounced among prospective students.
- More students will be attending college part-time while working to support themselves.
- Likely decreases in the amount of financial aid available accompanied by decreases in state funding will have a detrimental impact on students and the College.
- Increasing numbers of high school students will enroll in college classes through the “early college start program” and “tech-prep” classes.
- Increasing technological changes will require training and retraining of faculty and staff.
- Those economically challenged in our community without experience with or regular access to computers (so called “digital divide”) will become more common. The College must ensure access to technology for all its students.
- Shortages of college faculty and K-12 teachers are expected due to unusually high numbers of retirements over the next decade. ACC will need to aggressively recruit to maintain its high quality instruction. Special attention should be paid to the recruitment of minority faculty and staff to more accurately reflects the larger Austin area demographics.

#### ***Phase Two: New Technologies, Faculty/Staff Development, Institutional Processes***

These three committees were charged with investigating the scholarly literature, considering ACC’s current state, and making recommendations for integrating new instructional technology, developing faculty and staff, and preparing the institution for needed changes in its institutional structure. Some key findings and recommendations were:

##### ***Teaching and Learning***

- ACC will continue to transform from an “instruction” paradigm to a “learning” paradigm without abandoning pedagogic strengths of the instruction paradigm.
- ACC will need to promote the integration of appropriate technologies into teaching and learning.
- ACC will need to employ appropriate technology for student assessment, faculty development, and faculty assessment.
- Use of a variety of tools, teaching styles and formats will be needed to maintain and improve student success.

- Development of a self-evaluation process will lead faculty/staff to a logical individualized professional development plan (IPDP).
- ACC will need to encourage and reward faculty creativity and collegiality.
- Faculty and staff development will become more integrated, especially as it relates to technology.

***Infrastructure and Processes:***

- Emerging technologies will transform ACC into a “Webcentric” college. Among the technologies most likely to affect the ACC community in the next decade are wireless networking, collaboration tools, digital video and Internet2, handheld devices, videoconferencing, and simulations.
- ACC will need to establish an information technology infrastructure that would provide all such equipment and bandwidth as furthers the college’s mission.
- ACC will need to provide an integrated administrative/information system for students, faculty, staff, and the community.
- A comprehensive information management infrastructure is needed that encompasses technology, facilities, policy, and process.
- A comprehensive information competency system is needed for staff, faculty, administrators, and students.

***Distance Learning:***

- Support services will need to be improved especially for distant students.
- Distance Learning, particularly online courses, will significantly increase at ACC. A college culture that supports the faculty, staff, and students involved in these courses is necessary for them to improve their success rate.
- More analysis of distance learning courses aimed at improving success/retention rates coupled with appropriate course and faculty development opportunities will become necessary.
- More faculty teaching in traditional classrooms will elect to use some new technologies, moving ACC away from “distance learning” and toward a “distributed learning” paradigm.

***Internal and External Relations:***

- Creating partnerships with other groups or agencies in the community will continue to be very important.
- The identification and remediation of barriers to effective communication will be needed throughout the college, especially where related to perceived differences among employee groups at ACC.

***Phase Three: Implementation***

The Implementation Committee is working on plans to implement recommendations from the phase two committees and incorporate these recommendations into the Master Plan. Some of their recommendations follow:

- ACC will need to plan for the increased time commitment required of faculty to keep abreast of new technologies and teaching innovations.
- Tightening financial constraints will require ACC to adapt to evolving circumstances. Effectiveness here will be predicated on an understanding of and willingness to engage the process of institutional change.
- Shared governance and other truly participative models for change promise to help reduce a climate of cynicism that exists among some employees.
- Accountability at all levels must be part of the process.

***Common Questions***

In the course of pursuing our strategic focus of “Infusing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Innovation into Learning, Committees grappled with many important questions, some of which are summarized below:

***Increasing Demands on Limited Resources***

- How does ACC meet increasing numbers of students’ needs with decreasing financial resources?

- How will ACC prepare for the unique needs of projected increases in student minorities, especially Hispanics?
- What impacts will increasing demands for distance learning have on our college? How will ACC respond?
- As demands for the integration of technologies into our college intensify, how will ACC afford the attendant increasing hardware, software, maintenance, and personnel costs?

***Faculty/Staff Development***

- How might development of new knowledge and skills help ACC sustain employee excellence?
- How can ACC attract and maintain innovative, cutting-edge technology support and training specialists?

***Technology***

- How will ACC more effectively manage the increasing demand and production of electronically based information?
- How will our college ensure appropriate and effective assessment and evaluation of newly incorporated technologies in college structures, teaching, and learning?
- How will ACC assess the tangible and intangible costs and returns on investments in technology?
- Will ACC sustain and support new technologies over the long term?

***College Culture***

- Will the substantial efforts of SF Committees lead to meaningful change?
- Will new initiatives in the Master Plan reflect recommendations from the SF Committees?
- Will there be college-wide dialogue addressing culture-change issues, and will that dialog lead to an earnest effort toward culture reform on the part of employees at all levels?

***Implementation Process***

- Should ACC continue a faculty/staff driven strategic planning process similar to the SF of our alternate self-study?
- How often should we conduct a thorough environmental scan, and who should do it?
- Should the work of the SF Committees be continued, where possible, using existing college committees?
- How should we monitor changes recommended by SF Committees?

***Conclusion***

The above summary offers both a vision and a roadmap to effective institutional change at ACC. Although specific changes may be attainable, reshaping the college culture so these and other necessary changes would be better understood and accepted by college employees will require a broader, institution-wide commitment. Regardless of position in the college, we all share a common concern for meeting the needs of our students and community. Throughout this process, values that reflect our concern for student and community needs were evident and could provide a common ground starting place for a revolution in ACC's culture. Some of these values include:

- Access to quality education for our students.
- Respect for diverse backgrounds and ideas.
- Trust and openness.
- Cohesiveness, collegiality, cooperative, and participatory problem-solving.
- Innovative faculty, staff, administrators and students.
- Excellence in service of the needs of our community.

Our college's discussion and investigation into "Infusing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Innovation into Learning" led us, inadvertently, to an opportunity to reaffirm our college's mission and future vision, and, most importantly, improve our institution's culture in order to continue making meaningful strides toward being student and community centered.

**Note:** The SF Committee reports are available on the web at: <http://www.austincc.edu/sacs>