ADVANCEMENT SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

SOUTH MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Phoenix, Arizona

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FOR

The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

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I.   OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION:

South Mountain Community College (SMCC) is a thriving institution and is part of the larger Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) located in Phoenix, Arizona. While the District serves more than 250,000 students annually, SMCC, even though the smallest of the colleges in the district serves roughly 10,000 annually in the rapidly growing and increasingly diverse communities of South Phoenix, Ahwatukee, Tempe, Gualalupe, and Laveen.

South Mountain Community College and its employees are a credit to the Maricopa County Community College District. Its community is supportive of the institution, its students are able to find the services and programs of study they need, its employees are committed to the work at hand, and the College is functioning within its stated mission.

Still, SMCC finds itself dealing with challenges similar to those felt nation-wide, most particularly, continuing decreases in state revenues. However, the Maricopa County Community College Board of Trustees has elected to not increase tuition for fiscal 2010, further exacerbating the financial challenges for SMCC. While the Board believes that the district colleges, including SMCC, can maintain their current level of service, the realities of this action are proving difficult at a time when enrollments are climbing.

The District board and its trustees face daunting challenges, not only as they integrate new members and serve with a new board chair, but also defining clearly their role, objectives, goals, their interaction with the Chancellor and college presidents, and engaging in meaningful communication and due process within a policy governance model. (It was unfortunate that the Board Chair could not participate, in person, with the HLC visiting team.) The Board Chair did comment on a conference call that there were some challenges in the district, but that "high tension" comes with pursing excellence.

SMCC displayed evidence of good cross-functional collaboration among various employee groups, as well as a significant effort aimed at including voices in the community (President's Community Advisory Council). The Team experienced a strong desire to work together and help lead the College forward. It was noted in conversations with the President's Leadership Advisory Council (PLAC) and others, that a more inclusive role was sought.

When asked by Team members, as to the principal top issues that SMCC must address, employees noted, in no particular order: Funding; Changes in the Board of Trustees; and Planning. This listing suggests the need for the College to ensure these elements in its targets for action in the immediate future.

II.   CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

Development of a Foundation Office
South Mountain Community College, at the direction of the District Chancellor, has initiated the early stages of a development office/advancement office on its campus.

The College has retrained a part-time employee to investigate best practices, develop organizational structure, initial goals, and recommend an approach to the College President. The Team recommends that SMCC consider, particularly in light of declining state revenues, and community interest, that the College proceed with the implementation of a foundation office.

President's Advisory Council

The President stated that one of his goals when joining South Mountain Community College was to reconnect the institution to South Mountain village and the other communities the College serves in South Phoenix. One tool the President has used to make this reconnection is the President's Advisory Council. The Team commends the College on its work in developing the membership of this group and encourages the College to continue to develop these connections and use this group as a tool in its environmental scanning and strategic planning process. While visiting with the PAC, several interesting ideas related to additional services or enhancement of current College services were provided:

- Expanding partnerships with lower grades to encourage students to stay in school and go to College from a young age. A specific need for connection of the College's fine arts programs to the younger grades was made. The College might investigate simple programs such as "College for a Day" where elementary aged students come to campus and take part in activities that showcase why students might wish to stay in school and go to college later in life. Or the College could encourage students to stay in school by linking elementary students with an SMCC student mentor.

- Work with the K-12 system to identify, attract, and/or create programs which help keep students in school and allows them the opportunity to afford a college education. The College could provide college scholarships to specific grades, such as 4th graders, at a targeted elementary school if they graduate from high school and then attend HCC. Hutchinson Community College created the High Flyers Program at a low income school. Eleven students stayed in school, therefore, receiving scholarships. One student who is graduating from HCC this May, not only received a full scholarship to HCC, he is receiving a prestigious award from the college.

- Continue to do outreach activities that focus on bringing the community to the campus. Existing outreach activities in the fine arts and the construction of the new joint library were both mentioned as excellent services the College provides to the community.

- Continue existing service learning programs and expand these where possible. A specific example that was given was to add service activities focusing on the revitalization of the Rio Salado river park area as well as South Mountain park.

- There is a perceived need in the community for additional services to be provided to young minority males. The College may benefit from becoming engaged with some of the programs at other institutions focusing on this segment of the population. Hillsborough Community College hosts a summit entitled, "Black, Brown, and College-Bound" in the fall of each year.

While the President's Advisory Council would like to see the College expand its services, they were also cognizant of the challenges South Mountain faces in the future. The President's Advisory Council provided an excellent discussion of the challenges faced by the institution. First, the College must be sensitive to the population it serves by never losing the "small" school feel that has made it so successful while it continues to grow and develop. A focus on first generation college students and first year experience activities may be of significant benefit to the institution.

Maricopa County Community College District Board of Trustees/Governance

The Maricopa Community College Board of Trustees is in transition, in part, due to newly elected members and their consideration of new initiatives. A review of board minutes, conversations with trustees, and college employees suggest that current and pending changes directed by the board are prompting confusion, miscommunication, and in some cases, even fear. While the Board has announced it operates under a policy governance model, current actions and potential future decisions it seems prudent for the Board to engage in a fundamental review of the "Carver Model" and an evaluation of its practice among trustees, particularly as it relates to the respective roles of the trustees and the chancellor. Finally, the Board of Trustees recently released an RFP to evaluate the operations of the district and the colleges. The Team encountered numerous concerns expressed by employees as to the intent of this effort, lacking clarity as to the problems to be addressed by the effort, concern as to how the decision was made to pursue the RFP, the amount of funding needed for such an undertaking at such a difficult economic time, the timing of the initiative, and finally, questions as to the level of involvement of administration. The Board would do well to engage in an immediate communication to all district employees presenting of the nature, purpose, goals, and deliverables of this effort.

Communications

At present, SMCC appears to be experiencing some growing pains, and as such, communications can oftentimes become fragmented or unintentionally inclusive. Conversations with various employees revealed a level of frustration insofar as they wished to be involved with the advancement of the institution. In some cases, employees were noted to be unclear on how priorities were established and uncertain as to where they are discussed. It was noted, for example, that the strategic plan priorities are handed down from administration rather than developed collectively. The Team recommends that the College consider the development of a communications plan that would address communication channels, forums for discussion, and follow up opportunities for action taken. Further, the plan might address the venues whereby employees can provide input on institutional activities and issues (e.g., budget development, organizational change, etc.).

The College appears to have a strong governance model which is exemplified by its democratically elected academic chairs. However, there were several statements made to the team that indicate the MAT employee group felt a disconnect between the process used in the academic areas and the process used during the institution's recent reorganization. Several MAT employees expressed concerns that the reorganization was not done in an inclusive manner. While staffing decisions and organizational activities are the responsibility and purview of the institution's leadership, when these types of organizational activities do occur in the future, leadership may wish to adopt a formalized communication plan which helps employees transition to this new system in a more effective manner.

The Office of Institutional Research provides valuable services to the institution. With limited resources, the office strives to serve all of the needs of the institution's requests for new data. However, the office is not functioning in a role that provides analysis of ongoing trends for data requests. Since historical data is not regularly archived in the Office of Institutional Research, the institution's data and reports are being spread to various departments which does not provide a consistent place for individuals to go when they need data on a program or service.

Office of Institutional Research
In addition, the Office of Institutional Research seemed to become aware of several data resources available on campus as a product of the team's visit and questioning. The institution is devoting resources to purchase of data retrieval services, data analysis tools, and other typically research related functions and services in its other departments rather than providing these from a single point. This most likely minimizes the effectiveness of the Institutional Research Office and the services it may be able to provide.

The Institutional Research office seemed to be disconnected from the new strategic planning process – particularly in the area of ongoing evaluation of specific strategic objectives as well as the planning process as a whole. The planning process does not have a stated evaluation mechanism nor has the institution tied measurement and evaluation tools to the individual objectives of the plan.

eLearning
The institution is using QualityMatters™ as a means of assessing the development of its online course offerings. In conversations with staff representing eLearning, the institution indicated that it did not have a way of assessing a course which was in progress – which is a limitation of the QualityMatters™ process. The institution may find value in use of the Blackboard Exemplary Course Program (ECP) (http://kb.blackboard.com/display/EXEMPLARY/Exemplary+Course+Program), which is available at no cost to the institution as a Blackboard client. This program provides a rubric which can be utilized, at no cost, to evaluate the implementation of online courses.

One of the goals stated for developing eLearning courses is to maximize usage of facilities space. However, the rather organic way in which hybrid and online courses are scheduled and the variety of formats of hybrid courses will not allow the institution to meet this part of their stated goal. If this is a goal for the institution, they may wish to

consider identifying specific hybrid formats (such as 25 percent,50 percent,75 percent) to which classes should conform. This will allow the institution to maximize facilities space.

The institution has utilized a variety of course development compensation models for its online courses. In some cases faculty were paid for development and in other cases, faculty were not paid for development. The institution should resolve this process and ensure that it is paying for development of the courses which most benefit the institution so that resources are being placed in those areas with the most need. For instance, the institution may wish to begin to put its development resources, whether this is support from instructional designers or compensation for those developing content, into the development of the Arizona General Education Curriculum so that these high enrollment courses could be placed online first. The institution must also work closely with the district in cooperative activities which maximize district resources while allowing the institution to maintain its integrity with regards to its own academic offerings. Financial and data-centered evaluations of not only the fiduciary decisions but also the course quality, student support, and other relevant success data should be evaluated as the institution moves forward with its online programs and courses.

Workforce Development

One of the five roles of the community college is to assist its area in workforce development. This is critical in helping to maintain the economic health of the community by assuring that workers have the skills that local employers need to remain competitive in the global economy.   Workforce development includes:

- Developing programs of study that link the high school and college career and technical programs so that young people are prepared for high-skill high- wage jobs. Currently 2/3 of all jobs require skill training beyond high school but not a baccalaureate degree.
- Providing coursework for adult students who need to retool their skills to stay employed in an increasingly competitive and global environment. This training is especially in demand with today's high numbers of dislocated workers.
- Developing customized training for local business and industry to help their employees gain new skills to meet new demands for technology and efficiency.

South Mountain Community College should consider placing a greater emphasis on career and technical education.   When the College was created in 1978, it served an area of Phoenix that was characterized as low income where students had little access to higher education. SMCC was developed as the gateway to four year universities. The community has changed significantly. Now in 2009, the area is characterized as growing and developing. There are new businesses, new houses, and new employers. The College needs to expand its role beyond the heavy emphasis on the first two years of a baccalaureate degree so that it can serve the expanding needs of its growing community.

The development of new programs must be based on a documented need for the program that includes

- analysis of workforce demand – current job openings, projected annual vacancies, projected wages, and the knowledge and skills needed for employment, and
- analysis of the College's ability and resources to develop and maintain a program – including facility needs, equipment costs, and personnel required.

The College must select those programs for development that have both current and future demand for workers and that will provide those who are trained with living wages.

Employer advisory boards are crucial, not just during the development of a new program, but also for the continued vitality of a program. There are many roles that effective advisory committees provide to a career program:

- **Curriculum and Instruction** - Committee members help identify and expand the use of new technologies, compare content with occupational competencies and tasks, analyze course content and sequence, assist in developing and validating tests, advise on labor market needs and trends, review, recommend, and assist in obtaining instructional materials
- **Program Review** – Committee members help review and recommend program goals and objectives, participate in program evaluation and recommend evaluation criteria, compare student performance standards to business/industry standards, assess, recommend, and/or provide equipment and facilities, evaluate the quality and quantity of graduates and job placement, and identify new and emerging occupations.
- **Recruitment and Job Placement** – Committee members can assist in reviewing teacher selection criteria, assist in recruiting new staff and potential students, provide or obtain internships and work-based learning opportunities for students, assist with career days/job fairs, and hire graduates/program completers.
- **Student Organizations** – Committee members can assist in developing and judging competitive skills events, sponsor student organization activities and assist in fundraising, assist students with career development, and evaluate student performance
- **Staff Development** – Committee members may provide in-service activities for instructors, provide instructors with retraining/back-to-industry and summer opportunities for technical upgrading, support staff attendance at conferences, and conduct workplace tours
- **Community/Public Relations** – Committee members represent the CTE program to employers, community, and the media, present programs to community groups, establish programs to recognize outstanding students and faculty, and assist in developing a marketing plan.
- **Resources** – Committee members make or obtain donations, establish scholarships and awards, provide tours and field trips, job shadowing experiences, and speakers, and leverage community resources and broker community partnerships.

With the help of advisory committees, each program must identify program outcomes – a list of what completers of the program will know and be able to do. Through curriculum mapping, it should then be determined in which course each of these knowledge and skill

outcomes are introduced, developed, and finalized. Through regular assessment, the faculty must examine whether the completers are able to meet the outcomes. When deficiencies are found, the faculty can look to the curriculum map to determine where aspects of the curriculum should be enhanced or expanded.

Each career and technical program should be regularly analyzed for vitality. This includes several aspects of the program that could include the following questions:

- Does the growth in enrollment in the program equal or exceed enrollment growth for the college?
- Is there sufficient enrollment to warrant the number of full time faculty employed for the program?
- Is the program cost effective?
- Does the program provide students with non-traditional scheduling and a range of delivery methods?
- Is class size sufficient to be cost effective?
- Is retention to end of semester at least 80% for first year courses and 90% for second year?
- Does the program complete the cycle of outcome assessment each year?
- Do at least 50 students declare a major in this program each year?
- Are there at least 30 degree and certificate completers each year?
- Does a labor market analysis confirm sufficient job openings and wages starting at 150% of minimum wage?
- Does the program have an active advisory committee that meets at least twice each year and includes at least 5 employers?
- Are student skills assessed using nationally accepted skill standard for licensure or certification?

Student Learning

Through the TRIO program, SMCC recently subscribed to the services provided by the National Student Clearing House--the Clearing House provides institutions of higher learning with data on the location of students that transfer to four-year colleges. The team encourages even broader use of student transfer data by groups such as SMCC's Institutional Research Office and its Strategic Planning Team.

The College is taking positive steps toward improving its freshman orientation program. In the future, SMCC could expand those efforts to include a more lengthy "first year experience." The National Resource Center for the First Year Experience is an organization dedicated to helping colleges to guide students through the transition from secondary education to colleges and universities (http://www.sc.edu/fye/).

The team applauds SMCC for its efforts to involve students in service-learning. At present, the student affairs office has taken the lead in promoting civic engagement. As the college continues to encourage community service, the international Campus Compact may serve as a resource. The compact publishes monographs and hosts conferences that allow practitioners to share information with respect to forming strategies for aligning curricular goals with extra-

curricular projects (www.compact.org). Mesa Community College's Center for Service-Learning may also serve as a model.

Assessment

The team commends SMCC and the Academic Program Review and Assessment of Student Learning Committee (APRASL) for the work they have accomplished thus far in the area of program review and student learning assessment; specifically, the work that has been developed through the Higher Learning Commissions (HLC) Student Learning Academy.

As a result of the College's participation in the Academy Roundtable, four general education outcomes have been defined and a project was developed that allows the college to create course outcomes that will be linked to general education outcomes and then assessed. Additionally, the team applauds the formation of "the SMCC Experience" which focuses on student growth, engagement and satisfaction. The development of these projects shows SMCC is committed to student learning and student success.

However, while there are projects and some activities in place to assess student learning, the entire cycle has yet to be developed. It should be noted, that assessment is a process by which faculty gather information to help improve their teaching and to ensure students are learning. It is meant to provide direction for student learning, to determine strengths and weaknesses of instruction and to provide evidence that there is a continued cycle of improvement.

The process usually involves gathering data to assess learning at the course, program and institutional levels and uses the data to monitor learning to find ways to continually improve the learning process.

Again, the team would like to commend SMCC for the work they have accomplished to date, but would also like to share some suggestions for improving and strengthening their student learning initiative. These suggestions are:

- The College may want to consider providing training for all faculty and academic staff so there is common understanding and appreciation of student learning and assessment throughout the entire institution.

- The College may want to consider a student learning plan that outlines expectations and activities at a course, program and institutional level. That plan could include goals, specific outcomes, measures and timelines.

- The College may want to further utilize the resources available to them through the Student Learning Academy to assist in the development of the plan.

Colleges have been focusing on student learning for the past decade and there are several resources available:

- Assessing for Learning- Building a Sustainable Commitment across the Institution, written by Peggy Maki and published by the American Association for Higher Education in Sterling, Virginia, in 2004. This text provided a thorough overview of the assessment of learning, numerous examples and an extensive bibliography for further reading.

- How Do They Know We Know- Evaluating Adult Learning, published by Jossey-Bass, 1998. Written by Jane Vella, Paula Berardinelli and Jim Burrow. Besides providing as way to follow assessment primer, there are three fine examples of evaluating learning in existing programs that would give faculty a model for further analysis. A glossary is also included.

- A Teacher's Guide to Performance-Based Learning and Assessment, published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in 1996. This book guides faculty through the analysis of developing performance based tasks.

- Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing and Improving Assessment in Higher Education, published by Jossey-Bass, 1999, written by Catherine Palomba.

- Student Learning: A Central Focus for Institutions of Higher Education, published in March of 2002 by Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin offers contributions from over twenty-five colleges on assessment practices.

III.   RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PROGRESS, AND/OR PRACTICES

South Mountain Community College enjoys a beautiful campus, marked by well-maintained campus buildings, grounds, and infrastructure. Indeed, the College has made significant strides in planning for campus expansion, through a partnership with the local community. These observations, combined with conversations with college employees, suggest an institution that is focused on the management and continuation of its campus and off-site instructional centers.

Employees have a particularly high level pride about SMCC and the work they do. Without exception, the Team encountered employees who believed in the good work they undertake, the bright future of the organization, the launch of a new building on campus, and commitment to student success. Employees have also noted the need for data and its importance in institutional improvement and are making headway in improving access and use of data in decision-making.

The College's finances are in good order. The District Office provides the bulk of the support needed to run SMCC. Budget plans are developed using actual revenue streams from the previous fiscal year. Budget targets are set and communicated to campus for local budget development for the next year. Historical audits reveal no material findings in their accounting processes.