Introduction:

Rio Salado College is a non-traditional institution based in Tempe, Arizona, and is the largest Community College provider of online education in the United States, with current online enrollment of 41,000 students. The College has strong roots in the principles of Total Quality Management, which incorporates the Plan-Do-Check-Act improvement cycle. “Relentless Improvement” has long been a Core Value at the College. These principles led Rio Salado to seek membership in the Transparency by Design initiative at its inception in 2007, as the focus on accountability and quality dovetailed perfectly with learning assessment processes already in place. Rio Salado remains the only Community College member to date.

The Opportunities:

The College’s Learning Assessment Team is comprised of Faculty Chairs, The Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, and Academic Deans. Team members work collaboratively on College assessment goals which include Student Learning Outcomes, Program Review, and Academic Co-Curricular Program Review, learning together to develop strategies and a common framework as they implement the Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle (PDCA). The consistency of using this cycle enables Faculty Chairs to maintain their focus on established course and program goals and to commit to standards that are important for increasing student learning and students’ skills. The College’s comprehensive assessment of student learning outcomes and curricular and co-curricular outcomes are utilized on an annual basis to gauge the overall student population’s competencies.

The Solutions:

Engaging in Transparency by Design has allowed Rio Salado College to improve its programs and offerings in a systematic manner as part of the College’s larger assessment efforts. By adhering to the TbD process, decision makers such as Faculty Chairs and Academic Deans are able to review, assess, and discuss a program’s student learning outcomes. In cases where clear evidences of student learning outcomes are present, programs are submitted to the College Choices for Adults; Transparency by Design (TbD) website for external review and validation by WCET. Once validated, program information is released to the website for public and student viewing.
For programs that are new or lack sufficient data to support evidence of student learning outcomes, the Faculty Chairs and Academic Deans work collaboratively to identify the gaps in data so that appropriate measurable student learning outcomes can be designed. When necessary, curricular updates such as course content changes, assessments, rubrics, and external validation instruments such as nationally-normed exams are implemented, to further substantiate and provide evidence that outcomes are achieved.

The value of Transparency by Design for Rio Salado College is that it helps the College improve new and current programs as well as highlight the strengths of existing programs. Included in the process of presenting data publicly is the connection from the program to the external community; specifically, to employers. The Alumni Satisfaction Survey quantifies responses related to the satisfaction of the students’ educational experiences and relevance of their education to their careers.

Because Transparency by Design is the only national accountability initiative that publishes student learning outcomes at the program level, membership has enhanced the work of the Learning Assessment Committee, by providing a vehicle for public display of the data gathered during the process of planning, data collection, improvements, and implementation across individual courses and programs.

**Conclusion:**

Annual collection and reporting of program data for the TbD initiative ensures that the College actively evaluates each of the featured programs between regularly scheduled comprehensive Program Review cycles. These are ongoing, with each program subject to review on a five-year rotation. As a measure of “spot checking” the achievement of student learning outcomes, the use of TbD data between formal Program Review cycles allows the College to engage in assessment that is “not a loop, but an upward spiral” of continuous Plan-Do-Check-Act Quality Assurance, in keeping with the philosophy and methods of “Relentless Improvement.”