Rio Salado College

Application

Awarded the 2017 Excellence in Assessment Designation

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Institutional Context

Rio Salado College, headquartered in Tempe, Arizona, was established in 1978 by the Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) to serve nontraditional students at a distance. In AY2015-16, the College served almost 55,000 students, including over 27,000 online, offering more than 600 distinct online courses through weekly start dates throughout the year. Current data indicate that approximately 26% of the students are seeking degrees and certificates from Rio. The rest are enrolled in courses for career advancement, personal development, transfer credits, or non-credit classes. College assessment practices reflect the reality of a student body with such diverse goals by acknowledging that learning is a multidimensional process, revealed over time. This approach requires attention to outcomes, but focuses equally on the institutional experience that leads to those outcomes.

The College maintains a model whereby a small number of residential faculty (currently 19) serve as Faculty Chairs for a large adjunct cohort. Because this model facilitates collaboration and strategic decision-making by Chairs across disciplines, assessment of college-wide student learning has been faculty-driven since inception. Inclusion of Rio adjunct faculty in institution-wide assessment work is described in A College Where Adjuncts Are Not Just Add-ons, featured on the NILOA website in March, 2017.

The College has a "one course, many sections" model, with the same online content taught by all instructors through a proprietary course management system, RioLearn, enabling the institution to gather point-in-time and longitudinal data on each assessment across multiple sections and semesters. Thus, strategic decisions can be made on how to allocate resources for curricular improvements that will benefit all students in a particular course and/or program. This practice aligns with the College's core values, including "relentless improvement," as well as the College Mission which focuses on a commitment to transformative learning through data analytics and institutional accountability. Accordingly, the new College Strategic Plan evidences the college's commitment to integrated assessment practices under its third "pillar," *Accountability, Assessment, and Quality Assurance*.

Domain 1: Groups and Individuals Engaged in Assessment Activities

Rio Salado fosters an environment of inclusiveness by involving representatives from across the institution in assessment work.

The Learning Assessment Team meets biweekly and includes representation from Faculty Chairs who serve in roles such as Student Learning Outcome Coordinators, Program Review

Coordinator, and Accreditation (HLC) Chair; senior administration, including the Vice President of Academic Affairs; institutional research (IR) personnel; student affairs personnel on an ad hoc basis (for example, on program review committees and for co-curricular assessment discussions), and the Library Chair representing student support areas.

The Development Team is a cross-functional body that supports Rio Salado's Core Practices, reflecting the College's roots in Learning Organization theory. Tri-chaired by the College President, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, and a veteran Faculty Chair, the team includes faculty and senior administrators from academic affairs, student affairs, administrative affairs, and institutional technology, and meets weekly to facilitate interdepartmental and interdisciplinary collaboration and communication. The team receives regular updates regarding assessment efforts, and current and new initiatives are shared with the opportunity for College Leadership to provide input and feedback.

Faculty Chairs meet biweekly and engage in cross-disciplinary and consensus-building discussions covering such areas as curriculum, policy, and college-wide student learning outcomes assessment.

Adjunct Faculty Focus Forums are convened biannually for discussion on multiple aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment. Varied and diverse participants are identified for each forum, so that in-depth feedback from multiple disciplines and viewpoints can be elicited. A direct outcome of a recent forum was the comprehensive revision of AFD (Adjunct Faculty Development) content, which includes modules on the five college-wide student learning outcomes.

The Offices of **Student Life and Leadership** and **Honors** coordinate student activities for college co-curricular assessment work, which includes students from Phi-Theta- Kappa, Adult ACE (Adults Achieving a College Education), ACE Puente (Youth ACE), Honors, and the National Society for Leadership and Success.

Domain 2a. Student Learning Outcomes Statements

Rio Salado has long-established campus-level outcomes for assessment of student learning. The model of identifying cross-disciplinary outcomes was adopted 20 years ago by the Faculty Chairs. The following outcomes are currently measured across both General Education and Occupational curricula: Critical Thinking, Information Literacy, Oral Communication, Reading, and Writing.

Rubrics to assess levels of student performance for these outcomes allow for consistency and comparison across cohorts, and the outcome statements and rubrics are posted publicly to the [College's assessment website](#), providing access for students, staff, faculty, and the public-at-large. These outcomes align substantially with the [Intellectual and Practical Skills](#) identified by the Association of American Colleges & Universities as essential learning outcomes.

Student performance in these outcomes has been measured at the course level over a number of ["Plan-Do-Check-Act" (PDCA) cycles](#) in the past decade. Rio's home-grown Assessment Data Display facilitates access to student scores on assessments at the course level across disciplines and by co-curricular student groups. Data from a 2015-16 analysis of 1.2 million student assessments indicate that over 80% of students across all disciplines and courses performed, in aggregate, at college level (earning 70% or better on the assessment) on all five college-wide student learning outcomes. Co-curricular student data revealed 83%-88% performance at or above college level. Because of the vertical alignment of student learning outcomes, course-, program-, and college-wide, faculty were able to drill down to the department- and course levels to identify assignments needing intervention for one or more of these outcomes. New PDCA cycles were then implemented, and results are monitored annually to assess their efficacy and inform decision-making.

Domain 2b. Campus-level Assessment Plan

Rio Salado's first formal assessment plan was implemented in 1991. Over the years, the plan has progressed from a static document to a dynamic, ongoing, and evolving series of activities that are integrated across the teaching and learning spectrum and align with the college mission documents and strategic planning pathways.

Within the framework of Rio's faculty model described above, Faculty Chairs and administrators have implemented collaborative and integrated processes for assessment and improvement of student learning. Examples include the five college-wide student learning outcomes, which were chosen as a result of a deliberate process of shared governance including faculty, administration, and co-curricular leadership. Faculty collaborated on the development of the standardized and tested rubrics to be applied across disciplines. Thus, student learning outcome data can be extracted and analyzed at the course-, discipline-, department-, program-, and college levels. These data are used to inform curricular modifications and/or instructional interventions, professional development, and student engagement initiatives.

From 2007-2010, Rio Salado participated in the Higher Learning Commission's Assessment Academy. As a result, the College now has a [systemic and formal Program Review model](#) that facilitates in-depth examination of its programs, incorporating both curricular and co-curricular

components, to ensure that the program is effective and relevant. Institutional Research pulls comprehensive data, including persistence and completion rates, for each program. Final program reviews receive feedback from the Assessment Team, and selected executive summaries are posted to the College's Assessment website.

Domain 2c. Campus-level Assessment Resources

Financial Resources
Rio Salado designates budgetary resources for institution-level and course-level assessment in accordance with the priorities identified via the Strategic Planning process.

Financial resources are dedicated to the nationally-normed **ETS Proficiency Profile**, which assesses student performance on cross-college outcomes and compares them with peer institutions. The instrument measures three skill areas that align with Rio's college-wide student learning outcomes: Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing. The College added information literacy questions for the 2015 administration. Rio students' mean total scores have been consistently and significantly higher than the ETS comparative cohort. **Rio Learning Outcomes Grants (RioLOGs)** have been available since 2007. These are internal college grants that provide a mechanism for Faculty Chairs to engage adjunct faculty in developing student learning outcomes-based initiatives that are directly linked to assessment data. In AY 2015-16, $15,608 was dedicated to RioLOG projects for curricular improvement in general education courses and applied programs.

Information Resources
In place of a static assessment plan document, the Assessment Team maintains a dynamic and evolving SharePoint site which includes plans and survey data for each of the college-wide student learning outcomes; data on course-level assessment cycles; documentation of RioLOGs; program review model templates, completed reviews, and reviews in progress; and an historical archive of annual assessment reports dating back to 2000. The SharePoint site is open to all residential faculty, academic administrators, institutional research staff, and instructional support staff, providing a transparent vehicle for college stakeholders to keep abreast of assessment initiatives.

Student Learning Outcomes Work Lab (OWL)
The Rio Salado Outcomes Work Lab (OWL) is a "one-stop resource" to facilitate student mastery of the five college-level learning outcomes. The site is aligned with the college rubrics for these outcomes and includes comprehensive library-developed research guides and

additional resources for student learning in these areas. The guides are included in Adjunct Faculty Development (AFD) modules that familiarize the adjunct faculty with use of the rubrics for grading assignments, and they are embedded in multiple courses across disciplines to provide students with just-in-time instruction in Critical Thinking, Information Literacy, Oral Communication, Reading, and Writing. During AY2015-16, the OWL received over 20,000 hits.

Adjunct Faculty Development (AFD) Student Learning Outcomes Workshops
Rio Salado's AFD online workshops are designed to provide comprehensive continuing education for adjunct faculty, and include a college-wide Student Learning Outcomes track. To date, 109 adjunct faculty have completed at least one workshop in the track. Instructors who complete all five are awarded a Student Learning Outcomes badge.

Outstanding Adjunct Faculty Assessment Award
The annual Outstanding Adjunct Faculty Assessment Award recognizes contributions in assessment of student learning, as well as general excellence in teaching and learning. Criteria for recognition of excellence in assessment include the following:
- Writing and revision of course assessments
- Review of assessments for effectiveness and improvement
- Participation in RioLOGs
- Student Learning Outcomes work at the departmental level
- Contributions to development of assessment interventions, rubrics, or customized grading tools at the departmental level

Domain 2d. Current Campus-level Assessment Activities

Sharing via Public Website
As referenced in Domain 2a, the College maintains a public [Assessment of Student Learning website](#) so that the institution's assessment data and processes are transparent and available to all stakeholders. Executive summaries of assessment reports and formal program reviews, along with rubrics and library research guides for the college-wide student learning outcomes, are available from this portal for access by all on- and off-campus stakeholders. A link to this assessment website is included in the community section of [Rio's Homepage](#).

The College's institutional effectiveness website also publishes data about student completion, transfer, and special student populations in an annual [Fact Sheet](#), as well as data from Rio's participation in the [Voluntary Framework of Accountability](#).

As indicated above, the Learning Assessment Team issues an annual [Assessment Report](#) detailing results of student learning outcomes assessment at the institutional and course levels, identifying best practices, and indicating areas for improvement and future growth. The report is shared during College-Wide Meetings and All-Faculty Meetings.

Faculty Meetings

Rio Salado holds an **All-Faculty Assessment and Learning Experience** for adjunct faculty each year, which includes a general assembly featuring an assessment update from the Vice-President of Academic Affairs, and updates on college-level assessment of student learning outcomes. The general session is followed by discipline-specific discussion of assessment content during individual department meetings. Almost 600 adjunct faculty members attend this event each year.

Biweekly **Faculty Senate Meetings** include an assessment update as a standing item on the agenda. Faculty Chairs are kept apprised of assessment initiatives and engage in collaborative and cross-disciplinary discussions as described in Domain 2b.

Cross-college Communication

As referenced in Domain 1, the Development Team is a cross-functional body that meets weekly and facilitates interdepartmental and interdisciplinary collaboration and communication. The team receives regular updates regarding assessment efforts, and current and new initiatives are shared which engage the broad (multi-level) College Leadership with providing input and feedback.

Assessment practices and results are shared with the College-at-large during spring and fall **College-Wide meetings**. The [assessment video](#) on the public website, which features representatives from across departments and divisions, will be highlighted during the next College-Wide meeting.

Domain 2e. Evidence of Campus-level Student Learning

Rio Salado's Learning Assessment Team includes representation from all groups collecting evidence of student learning. They are responsible for coordinating and tracking assessment activities across the College, preparing the Annual Assessment Report, and maintaining the currency of the Assessment of Student Learning public website. Institutional Research (IR) personnel serve on this team and play an integral role in its work. IR works with Faculty Chairs, department managers, and college administrators on systemic efforts towards effective assessment at all levels, including collecting and reporting on student learning outcomes at the

course level, administering college-level assessments of student learning outcomes (such as ETS), and providing data for program review. IR maintains the Assessment Data Display described in Domain 2a, enabling cross-disciplinary collection and comparative analysis of student learning outcomes data, including co-curricular student groups. As previously mentioned, the majority of Rio's students are not enrolled in programs. Thus, the Assessment Data Display and ETS administration allow for a snapshot of performance at a given time, reflecting both internal and external validity measures.

Each cross-college student learning outcome has a designated Faculty Chair serving as learning outcome coordinator. These five coordinators all serve on the Assessment Team and collaborate with senior administrators and IR to guide Rio Salado's centralized and systemic assessment work. Additionally, program review is under the purview of a designated Faculty Chair who also serves on the Assessment Team and works with the group to ensure a systematic rotation of reviews on a three-to-five-year basis.

Faculty Chairs of occupational programs often work with advisory boards, with whom they share relevant assessment data. These boards, which are comprised of representatives from companies that hire in the field, provide input on curricular updates and enhancements designed to improve program outcomes.

Domain 2f. Use of Campus-level Student Learning

Assessment Data Display
As mentioned in Domain 2a, the home-grown Assessment Data Display facilitates work with campus-level student learning. Using this tool, Faculty Chairs drill down to identify both point-in-time and longitudinal data at the lesson-, course-, and program levels that align with the five college-wide student learning outcomes. Areas for improvement are identified, and a PDCA cycle is then initiated. The Chair works with the corresponding Learning Outcome Coordinator to devise an intervention, as appropriate, and may apply for a RioLOG to involve adjunct faculty members in the work. The Learning Assessment Team reviews the Assessment Data Display annually as part of the PDCA cycle.

Assessment in Strategic Planning
The third pillar of the College's Strategic Plan, Accountability, Assessment, and Quality Assurance, reaffirms Rio Salado's dedication to demonstrating organizational effectiveness and accountability by measuring success at all levels, and to utilizing data analytics to drive the institution's culture of evidence and relentless improvement. Initiatives to actualize the plan include the development of dashboards to make evidence of campus-level student learning

even more transparent, and to ensure that the data collected is actually used to inform course-, program-, co-curricular-, and institutional improvements.

Domain 3. Reflection and Growth/Improvement Plan

Reflection

The strengths of Rio Salado's assessment work include longevity, the integration of assessment across disciplines and co-curricular student groups, and the systematic integration of assessment activities at the institution, program, and course levels.

The College has a long history of recognition for its assessment efforts. In 2008, Rio was a charter member of Transparency by Design. In 2012, the College was recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) for "building an accessible, comprehensive and systemic process for assessment, accreditation and accountability," and received the CHEA Award for Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes Award. Also in 2012, Rio Salado College was featured on the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) website for providing a variety of transparent information on student learning in a central location. Most recently, the Chair of Rio's Assessment Team was invited to author an "Assessment in Practice" piece for the March 2017 NILOA Newsletter.

Perhaps most important is the integration of assessment into the Strategic Plan. Rather than maintaining a separate college assessment plan with associated initiatives, learning and program assessment are now fundamental components that drive the strategic allocation of resources.

Growth/Improvement Plan

Declining student participation rates on the ETS Proficiency Profile present an opportunity for improvement. The Assessment Team decided in fall 2015 to include the invitation to take the ETS with the graduation application, and to incentivize students by paying for their regalia. This change has been implemented for AY2016-17.

Believing that further student input in assessment practices is vital to College processes, Rio has also developed an alumni survey that will be distributed annually to better inform these areas.

Planned improvements resulting from the centrality of assessment in the college's new Strategic Plan include the development and deployment of departmental reviews based on the academic program review model, with various levels of accountability measurement embedded in the processes. The development of dashboards will facilitate transparency and further reinforce the culture of accountability.

The College plans to incorporate annual updates to the President's Advisory Council on assessment practices and results, thereby facilitating dialog and input from the larger community.

Rio Salado College will monitor progress on the improvement plan by:

- Initiating PDCA cycles to increase student participation in the ETS proficiency profile
- Presenting the findings of the alumni survey college-wide, with the Assessment and Executive Teams leading review and direction-setting based on the findings
- Actively engaging in quarterly updates by the sponsor of each Strategic Plan pathway, including progress and accomplishments related to assessment work
- Disseminating the feedback from the President's Advisory Council related to the annual assessment update