

**External Consultant Program Review Report**  
**Library Co-curricular Program Review**

Middlesex Community College  
Bedford/Lowell, Massachusetts  
April 23, 2013

In Middlesex Community College's (MCC) program review process the role of the external consultant "serves as an objective, discipline-based expert who provides an external perspective on the department's demonstrated effectiveness in the areas supporting student success and academic achievement, productivity and resource management...". The following report provides that perspective based on information provided in the self-study submitted by Mary Ann Niles, Assistant Dean of Library Services, and corroborated in a site visit conducted on April 23, 2013 which included interviews and extended conversations with administrators and staff.

The initial contact in any self-study process is the document itself which lays the foundation for the evaluator to understand the institution and the program and on which the inquiry is based. This self-study was thorough, well-written and candid. It provided the data necessary to understand the issues, including those institutional decisions that impacted the library. Dean Niles did not seek to sugar-coat the areas that seemed problematic and was forthright in her assessment of the situations. It was abundantly clear that Dean Niles was very proud of the MCC library and was eager to share all aspects of it during the visit.

The external evaluator visit began with a candid conversation with the College Administration including Provost Phil Sisson, Assistant Provost Clea Andreadis, Dean Elise Martin and Assistant Dean Mary Ann Niles. From the beginning of the discussion it was clear that the Administration had read the self-study document thoroughly and was aware of their institutional library situation, as well as the current issues in academic libraries across the nation. It was also clear that as a group they supported a common vision for the library, exemplified by their work together in identifying and securing a prized Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries in Student Success (AiA) grant from the American Library Association/Association of College and Research Libraries (ALA/ACRL). Their continued communication about issues in the library, especially as they relate to Information Literacy, will be critical as the institution engages in this highly influential and prestigious grant opportunity.

In addition to the strong support from the Administration, there are a number of additional strengths to mention. Specifically:

- The Library provides full-service libraries at both of its campuses. Both are attractive, well-kept spaces with adequate print collections. As described in the self-study, both libraries are busy, high-energy areas with abundant numbers of computers for student use.
- The Library staff members, while few in number, are committed to providing high-quality library service and they work remarkably well as a team despite the distance between campuses. The part-time librarians actively participate in efforts to improve library service and instruction, their expertise is highly-valued in the library and they have been included in the discussion about library instruction and curriculum design. There is ample evidence that all librarians are willing to work with others outside the library, when time is available, and they actively seek solutions to the problems impacting the student experience in the library.
- The Library budget is regular and adequate. Despite budget restraint throughout the institution, the library has not suffered from deep cuts and they have been able to maintain collections, including the popular textbook reserve collection. The growth of electronic resources allows a possible reduction in purchase of print materials and consequently could ultimately have an impact on the use of space.
- The consortial relationship with NOBLE is an important one and one that MCC staff has contributed to significantly during the transition to an Open Source LMS. These contributions have provided an opportunity to shape the new LMS and provide the college with heightened input and access to the database, all of which can ultimately help to serve students better.
- As one of only eight academic libraries in New England, and 75 in the nation, it is commendable that MCC has been chosen to participate in Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries in Student Success (AiA). This important initiative which “supports the design, implementation and evaluation of a program to strengthen competencies of librarians in campus leadership and data-informed advocacy” will place this library in a strong position to support student learning. Although the library is in the very beginning of the program implementation, the opportunity for growth is enormous at the institutional level and ultimately will lead to the opportunity to inform practice at the national level.

As stated, there are many reasons to applaud the work in the department; however, in order to change the role of the library in the institution and assure that it is a vital part of the learning process, some concerns should be highlighted.

- Assessment of Information Literacy (IL) concepts at MCC is limited. Satisfaction and other surveys have been completed, but little was focused specifically what students are learning as a result of instruction in the library. This focus on assessing learning is a fairly new trend in academic libraries and one that is now prominently reflected in the revised NEASC Standards for Accreditation (2010). The revisions to “Standard 7 Library and Other Information Resources” have significantly increased the emphasis on Information Literacy and reflect the fact that colleges across the nation recognize that students are ill-prepared to navigate the complex and rapidly-growing world of electronic information. While they are the “experts” librarians alone cannot tackle this wide-ranging, institutional issue and must partner with other academic colleagues to move this important initiative. MCC’s role in the AiA should address this.
- One of MCC’s strengths is the library’s committed staff and yet, simply put, there are just not enough of them. With a handful of full-time staff members, the library administration has worked diligently to keep the library open for 72.5 hours per week and relying heavily on part-time personnel. Compensation for the clerk-level personnel (\$10. pr hr. without benefits) does not inspire commitment on the part of the workers and, as a result, turnover has been great. This has had a negative impact on the existing full time staff and resulted in both the Asst. Dean and others working overtime at the circulation desk. This is a poor use of valuable full-time professional librarians’ time.
- The discussion about staffing at the MCC libraries would not be complete without also including conversation about the profound changes in the services that have taken place in the library. The decision to eliminate the computer labs on campus and assign that task to the library without seriously including the library in the decision-making process is of serious concern. This decision suggests a lack of understanding about the role of libraries and information literacy in the academy and undermines the work of the professional librarians--redefining their role as computer lab assistants. This puts the entire institution at risk as it jeopardizes the college’s ability to support an Information Literacy initiative. If librarians at MCC are spending a majority of their time answering computer technology questions and dealing with printing and computer connection problems, then there is little time left to lead a robust IL program.

While the decision to combine the two areas may have had some advantages for other areas, in many respects it has had a deleterious effect on the library.

- It is no surprise that this shift has also had an effect on the physical space within the library. As the libraries have become computer labs, seating and lack of space for students has become a real problem. During the recent tour of the Bedford library an informal scan indicated that there was not a single empty table available to students and that fewer than 20-30 seats were available in the entire room. The ambient noise, while not deafening, was certainly loud enough to affect those students seeking a quiet study space. Surveys and student complaints bear this out. The Bedford campus also lacks group study space in which students can collaborate without disturbing other students. The Lowell campus had similar issues with crowding and noise, but to a lesser degree. Most academic libraries now seek integrated spaces that support both robust technology presence as well as adequate group/quiet study spaces. MCC's needs are no different.

Fortunately, some of these concerns can be easily tackled and addressing the dual role of computer lab/library is the first step in sorting out the issue. Many academic libraries incorporate aspects of IT/technology into a single campus location, often calling it a Learning Common(s) rather than Library. MCC can easily adopt the Learning Commons model by adding IT staff –either new or existing-- to the Library to help students with their technical/hardware/software issues. This gives the students the expert computer support that they need and also allows the librarians to serve in the students' best interest: as information literacy specialists. Alternatively, adequate numbers of new full-time library staff with technology skills could be hired, again, allowing the professional librarians to work pursue the AiA initiative and information literacy in general.

While space is at a premium across the campus, it is imperative for the institution to recognize the students' need for group study and to create/free up some spaces for students in the library to work collaboratively or, conversely, to work quietly if the noise of the library is too distracting.

The success of the solutions outlined above is grounded in open communication and collaborative planning between the Library, the Academic Administration and decision-makers in Information Technology and Space Appropriations and should result in mutually-beneficial solutions to these complex issues. With students best interest at heart, it is possible to provide a vibrant Library/Learning Commons with abundant

numbers of computers for research and other purposes, adequate technology support and an active information literacy initiative.

#### STRENGTHS:

- Attractive, busy, full-service libraries at each location
- Enthusiastic, committed library staff and administration
- Abundant computer resources at both campus locations
- Participation in the Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries in Student Success (AiA) grant from the American Library Association/Association of College and Research Libraries (ALA/ACRL)

#### CONCERNS:

- Assessment efforts do not include extensive measure of student learning
- Too few full-time library staff; high turnover for clerical positions
- Closing of computer labs across campus has resulted in a significant impact on the ability of librarians to provide adequate information literacy programming
- Physical space issues include overcrowding, noise, and lack of group study space

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Create a Learning Commons by adding IT staff to the existing Library/Computer lab space to assist students with their technology needs
- Focus professional librarians on supporting an integrated Information Literacy plan
- Identify spaces within the library for collaborative student use/quiet study
- Reach a mutually-agreed upon solution that benefits students' needs

Respectfully submitted by External Reviewer:

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