RETENTION, ATTRITION, AND THOMAS A. EDISON STATE COLLEGE

JUNE 30, 1987

RETENTION AND ATTRITION IN THE EDISON CONTEXT

The concepts of retention and attrition as applied to traditional colleges and universities are inappropriate for Thomas A. Edison State College given its unique model, mission, and student constituency. For traditional institutions there is an expected pattern of student progress from admission to degree completion. Conformance with the expected or normative behavior over time and resulting in a graduation is defined as retention. Deviation from the expected or normative pattern of progress is defined as attrition. The traditional college, through its admissions decisions, instruction, advising, housing, financial aid, library facilities, and student support services, has significant influence on many of the variables which affect a student's ability to meet expected standards of academic progress. One assumes that the degree of conformance to set standards provides evaluatory information about the quality of the college offerings and support services. It also provides feedback to internal constituencies in regard to the assumptions made about the students who are admitted and the institution's ability to see these students through to a successful outcome. Student attrition causes institutions to examine those aspects of its academic environment that may be contributing to abnormal patterns of student progress.

At Thomas A. Edison State College none of these assumptions are operant. First, there is no normative standard or institutional expectation as to patterns of student progress from admission to degree completion, nor should there be. Further, the College, because of its external model, does not assume significant control over those variables that determine patterns of persistence in the matriculation of its students. Edison State College serves

a mature adult population with an average age of 38. Edison assumes that its students are self-directed, goal-oriented adults capable of making their own decisions regarding their pattern of interaction with the institution and those things necessary for them to achieve their educational objectives. Edison, by design, is a noncampus, nonclassroom institution developed specifically to serve adults for whom traditional college programs are not viable options.

Consequently, the College has developed an entire delivery system focused on meeting the academic and advising needs of the distant learner. At Edison, the student controls the rate of academic progress by selecting credit-bearing options appropriate to his or her situation and by balancing the pursuit of those options with the priorities of professional and personal life.

Edison's functions are to help each student (or prospective student) clarify educational goals, to identify and explain the various opportunities available to achieve those goals, to evaluate demonstrated learning for college credit, and to interpret and apply Edison's academic policies throughout this process. This operating strategy stems directly from the Mission Statement, provided as an attachment to this report.

It is for these reasons that Edison State College does not view it appropriate to participate in comparative studies for which its variables are so radically different from those of more traditional institutions. This does not mean, however, that this institution should not engage in a process of structured, methodical, and studied introspection which addresses some of these same questions that retention studies raise for more traditional institutions.

For example, because this institution assumes that the learner is in charge and has control of his or her interaction with the institution, Edison State College is obliged to give that learner timely and accurate information on which the student may base academic decisions about pursuing educational objectives. The quality and timeliness of that information logically influences the ability of the student to interact with the institution and raises an analogue to a retention issue. Is it not, therefore, appropriate for the College to systematically evaluate the timeliness and quality of the information given to students so as to determine whether programs and processes in this regard are effective and meet the stated objectives? It is the intention of the College to systematically raise such questions, establish performance standards, and execute appropriate testing techniques to answer these questions. The common terminology describing this organized set of activities, standards, and measures is called "institutional outcomes assessment."

INSTITUTIONAL OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

The College is currently engaged in preliminary planning directed at implementing a program of institutional outcomes assessment. The institution expects to have, by the end of September, 1987, a detailed concept paper and planning document describing the process, objectives, and expected outcomes of institutional assessment. Further, the College expects to publish the results of the first year's assessment at the conclusion of the 1988 fiscal year. The process as currently envisioned will be grounded in the mission statement and

will flow through the activities and entire organization of the College. The thematic organization of this initiative, essentially Edison's plan to plan, is presented below.

In the beginning there is the mission statement of the College. It expresses Edison's raison d'etre and the base line or reference point for everything Edison does. The College conducts a series of programs and structured activities to achieve this mission. Each of these major programs or activities carries with it performance standards which define program effectiveness. These standards will be measured, and processes will be implemented to collect, analyze, and draw conclusions from these measurements. The resultant outcomes will guide policy decisions and performance evaluation and will provide useful feedback to our students and prospective students about the College. The mission-related programmatic activity of the institution falls into five categories:

Category 1 - Student Empowerment

This programmatic activity consists of the information provided to current and prospective students. Achieved largely through publications and various levels of advising, this information empowers the student to make accurate, informed decisions regarding academic pursuits. The efficacy, accuracy, timeliness, and appropriateness of Edison's communications will determine the degree to which students' expectations can be met through the Edison model.

Category 2 - Testing and Assessment

The processes of reviewing credentials, administering course-equivalent examinations, and evaluating portfolios documenting out-of-classroom learning

result in the award of credits. Because the Edison model requires that credits be granted only for legitimately demonstrated knowledge or skill, the quality, validity, and reliability of the testing and assessment practices are fundamental to students' progress in and satisfaction with their academic careers.

Category 3 - The Curricula and Student Learning Outcomes

As an academic institution, Edison State College must possess curricula which demonstrate that its graduates possess the intellectual competencies expected of a college graduate. Therefore, the College must examine the creation, structure, content, and periodic review of its curricula for validity and currency. To do this, Edison will develop appropriate methods for making these judgments, including the assessment of learning outcomes.

Category 4 - Directed Independent Learning

Through a program of directed independent study supported in part by the CALL Network (funded by the Governor's Challenge Grant), the College is involved in the provision of instructional opportunity and the evaluation of student learning. Therefore, evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of this activity is an important and relevant activity.

Category 5 - Academic Networking

Edison operates the Statewide Testing and Assessment Center and the Program on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction; has developed more than 100 credit transfer articulation agreements; provides access to learning materials produced by third party vendors; and maintains relationships with a variety of educational, government, military, corporate, and community agencies. Through this network, Edison serves as the hub of a higher education mini-system which

has been developed to provide adults with a broad range of educational options and with the linkages necessary to allow adults to take advantage of these options. The development and maintenance of this network as well as the preservation of academic validity throughout the array of options it creates are issues which address the quality of the Edison program. Edison will establish methods for addressing these issues which will result in the examination of institutional policy concerning academic networking.

The information gained from combining the assessment of these five major areas provides validation to Edison's operating assumptions while at the same time offering direction and guidance for institutional self-improvement. This exercise should also provide valuable and useful information to the ultimate beneficiary of the exercise, i.e. the adult learners Edison serves.

For example, analysis of student empowerment issues relating to timely and accurate information may indicate that prospective students require more information relating to their specific situations before deciding whether or not to enroll in Edison State College. Such a determination could change Edison's publications array, admissions strategy, and/or evaluation process, resulting in an improved "measurement" of student empowerment. For the student, this improvement could result in a more accurate expectation of the type of services and programs Edison can provide and, therefore, an enhanced rate of academic progress.

Approximately one-half of Edison's baccalaureate graduates apply to graduate and professional schools and about 90% are admitted to the school of their first choice. For the adult who desires a graduate degree, then,

enrolling in Edison is a reasonable action. Edison also knows that the average baccalaureate graduate earns a degree in about three years. However, students have earned degrees over periods ranging from a few months to as long as twelve years. The College has not developed a reliable predictor which would enable a student to determine how long it may take him or her to earn the degree, given the variability in academic preparation, out-of-classroom learning, and professional and personal responsibilities. The outcomes assessment process should enable Edison to identify and relate certain variables relating to acquired learning, resulting in more precision in predicting the time required to earn a degree.

For the student, having an approximation of time for degree pursuit will help them to balance other priorities in life, but it is important to note that, for a great many Edison students, earning the degree is not the highest priority. Consequently, Edison can only help the student to approximate time, not to control external variables.

Edison will also benefit from an enhanced ability to predict the length of students' academic careers, particularly in planning functions related to staffing, budget, and program development.

STOP

FISCAL YEAR 1988 ACTIVITIES

To institute the outcomes assessment process at Edison State College, the following activities are planned.

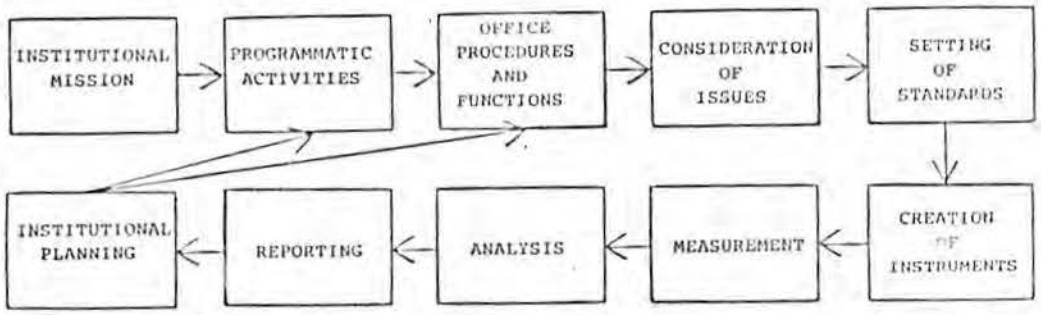
1. Create an Office of Institutional Research and Outcomes Assessment - Through a reallocation of staff, a position within the President's Office will be created and filled on July 1, 1987. The Director of

Institutional Research and Outcomes Assessment will have overall responsibility for planning and executing the process, designing the various measurement instruments, coordinating the work of college offices in support of the effort, conducting analyses, and writing reports for the College, the Department, students, and the general public.

2. Develop a Detailed Plan - On September 11, 1987, the Board of Trustees will review the plan for the outcomes assessment process. The plan will build upon the principles discussed earlier and will begin with identification of office procedures and functions which relate to the five categories of mission-related programmatic activity presented earlier.

3. Conduct Institutional Research and Outcomes Assessment - Because the objective of this effort is to measure the effectiveness and quality of what Edison does so that informed decisions can be made about institutional improvement, it will be necessary to establish standards against which the work of the College can be measured. To set standards, the staff will participate in a process of issues identification with respect to the listed office procedures and functions. Once issues are identified, standards will be established, measurement instruments will be created and applied, the data will be analyzed against the standards and various reports will be issued. This process is represented by the simple schema which follows.

THE OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PROCESS



The standards against which performance is to be measured will be established by staff and approved by the appropriate Vice President. Measurements will be both internal and external to the institution. Special emphasis will be placed on surveying applicants, enrolled students, alumni, and students who have discontinued their active status. The College views the client (the adult learner) as the ultimate judge of the quality of service provided. The expectations of the client and the College's degree of fulfillment of the expectations are fundamental to the measurement of quality of service.

Of course, categories concerned with academic standards will require different evaluative tools. The Curricula and Student Learning Outcomes category, for example, will be addressed through internal procedures (periodic degree program review, Academic Council deliberations), external review and accreditation processes (The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, The National League for Nursing), and application of student learning outcomes measurement

instruments. The actual measurement process in this case will involve the integration of the results of these various evaluative tools, and the comparison of the integrated measures to Edison's self-imposed standards.

The following timeline represents the reporting schedule of the outcomes assessment effort to Edison's Board of Trustees:

September 11, 1987	-	Submission of a detailed outcomes assessment plan.
June 3, 1988	-	Submission of preliminary results for FY 1988.
September 9, 1988	-	Submission of FY 1988 final results and an updated outcomes assessment plan.

The process is to be continuous, each year's standard-setting and measurement will build on what was learned in the previous cycle. Outcomes assessment will become part of institutional planning, and vice-versa. Ultimately, by setting ambitious standards and by planning to satisfy them, Thomas A. Edison State College will maintain and improve upon its institutional excellence and national reputation.

MISSION STATEMENT

Thomas A. Edison State College was founded by the State of New Jersey Board of Higher Education as an external degree institution with the basic purpose of expanding the spectrum of educational opportunities in the state by offering the opportunity to qualified persons to earn college credit and degrees by demonstrating their knowledge of college-level subjects through examination and assessment. In order to implement this basic purpose, it is the mission of Edison State College to:

A. Offer degree programs within the liberal arts, business and professional studies that best meet the needs of the adult learner.

B. Develop and administer appropriate testing and assessment instruments as a basic means of assisting Edison students in satisfying degree requirements.

C. Establish and administer institutional policies for the following methods through which Edison State College credits may be earned: college proficiency examinations, the individual assessment of prior learning, and/or the evaluation of transfer credits and special credentials.

D. Encourage the availability of college-level learning opportunities through cooperation with all types of institutions that are now providing, or have the potential to provide, college-level learning experiences outside the traditional modes of higher education. In developing these cooperative arrangements, Edison State College will not provide instruction directly but will award credit for such educational experiences either through the evaluation of non-collegiate programs or the direct testing of student learning outcomes.

E. Provide counseling and advising services to assist Edison students in planning their degree programs and selecting appropriate methods for satisfying degree requirements.

F. Operate a Statewide Counseling and Information Network designed to: 1) inform citizens about available postsecondary learning opportunities, and 2) advise them of appropriate options for continuing their education.

G. Develop linkages with or create educational delivery systems built around contemporary technology which will provide the distant learner with: 1) information and guidance on educational opportunities; 2) modes of support for independent study and assessment; and 3) access to media-based instruction and testing.

H. Provide the institutional leadership necessary to: 1) influence other higher education institutions to broaden educational opportunities for the adult learner, and/or 2) develop those interinstitutional cooperative relationships which will achieve such a goal.

Since the College has no faculty of its own, it will call upon the members of the faculties of other colleges and universities to provide the academic resources necessary to plan degree requirements, determine test content, perform individual assessments of student learning, and review the general academic policies of the College.

Originally approved by the
Board of Higher Education
December 15, 1972

Approved in revised form by the
Board of Trustees
December 5, 1980

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June 30, 1987

Dr. T. Edward Hollander
Chancellor
Department of Higher Education
225 West State Street
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Dear Chancellor Hollander: Ted

On October 17, 1986, the Board of Higher Education passed a "Resolution Establishing a Statewide Retention Initiative." On March 6, 1987, you promulgated instructions for the implementation of this initiative, and on April 16, 1987 you requested that institutions engage in a planning process toward meeting the objectives of the Board's October 17 resolution.

It was the original intent of Thomas A. Edison State College to request an exemption from participating in this initiative in that the concepts of "retention" and "attrition" as commonly understood are not applicable given the unique nature of this college. After some discussion with Dr. Marcus, Director of the Office of State Colleges, we have modified that position and wish to set forth our approach to addressing the institutional issues which get raised by examining retention even though traditional criteria and reference points are not applicable to this institution.

For Edison State College, the relevant aspects of retention merge with the College's on-going program of self-evaluation and become inextricably interwoven with our process of institutional outcomes assessment which is being formulated to begin in the coming academic year. It is the purpose of this paper to set forth those aspects of the concept of retention which are relevant for this institution to examine, and to outline a process of institutional outcomes assessment which will address the objectives of the Board of Higher Education's retention initiative. Further, it is our request that Edison State College's outcomes assessment project be used as the vehicle for complying with the spirit and objectives of the Board of Higher Education retention initiative but from a different point of view.

Outcomes assessment at Edison has the same starting point as the retention challenge--the institutional mission. Similarly, it will depend on the collection and analysis of data concerning students and graduates and their demographic and academic characteristics. The analyses will be compared to institutional performance standards, and short- and long-term goals will be generated to achieve these standards. Activities developed toward goal achievement will constitute institutional change and, ultimately, improvement in the quality of Edison State College.

The outcomes assessment process will differ from the requested retention plan in that our overall objectives cannot be based on retention percentage goals per se, but rather on the capacity of Edison State College to empower students (and prospective students) to make informed, appropriate decisions about their academic objectives.

For reasons detailed in this report, Edison cannot and should not attempt to influence the many factors external to the institution which may cause an Edison student to discontinue enrollment. We do, however, recognize our obligation to provide timely and accurate information and advising services to students and to maintain quality curricula and academic processes, thereby minimizing undesirable disincentives to student enrollment.

Following the review of this report, I will request a meeting with appropriate representatives of the Department to discuss our outcomes initiative in more detail.

Sincerely,

George A. Pruitt
President

GAP/daw

cc Dr. Laurence Marcus, Director
Office of State Colleges

Mr. Edward A. Morante, Director
College Outcomes Evaluation Program

Ms. Gerri Collins
Executive Assistant to the President

Dr. Jerry Ice, Vice President
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