



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A MEETING OF THE MINDS

“This could be one of those triggering moments in the history of the college that will result in profound organizational change.”

*Dr. James C. Henderson
President, San Juan College
Meeting of the Minds, August 2001*

In August 2001, San Juan College convened a Meeting of the Minds (MOM) to address a challenge faced by community colleges around the country—alarmingly increasing numbers of underprepared learners. Through this forum, we hoped to showcase the successful elements of our existing developmental learning program, integrate best practice recommendations into an enhanced model for developmental learning, and propose program development initiatives to continuously improve our model.

In preparation for this two-day colloquium, all who focus on developmental learning at San Juan College—faculty, college administrators, division deans, professional staff, and frontline employees—worked to prepare their “pieces of the puzzle” for the discussion table. We researched the history of developmental learning on our campus, collected demographic and academic data about our developmental students and basic skills courses, and benchmarked our institution against other colleges and universities around the country. Finally, we invited practicing experts, some of the most prominent researchers and authors in the field, to join our investigation:

- Dr. John Roueche, Professor and Director of the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin, to contribute insights from three decades of research, teaching, service, and leadership in the field
- Dr. Suanne Roueche, former Director of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), to share her experiences from a faculty and faculty development perspective

- Dr. Byron McClenney, president of Kingsborough Community College, to lend his learnings from a similar process implemented during his tenure as president at the Community College of Denver (CO)
- Dr. Kay McClenney, Senior Associate with the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning and the Director of the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE), to share knowledge gained through her work with community colleges around the country.

During the MOM, instructional leaders from the college shared the information they had gathered: current program components, assessment and placement practices, student success data, and more. With this knowledge, our experts offered informed, relevant feedback. Thus, our goal was achieved—to integrate the collective wisdom of our faculty with the significant insights of our expert guests. As a result of this process, we developed a comprehensive list of action items that would enhance our model for developmental learning and set specific targets for the 2001-2002 academic year.

At the close of the colloquium, participants pushed for a repeat performance, to revisit the action items for 2001-2002, and set new targets for the following year. Suddenly, we realized that the significance of this event lay not only in the list of action items the group had developed, but in the process we had discovered. Rather than a onetime event, MOM could become a platform for discussion that would create shared knowledge about developmental learning and support the advancement of targeted learning initiatives. In the words of participants:

“Wonderful opportunity to discuss data, to learn, and to share. Great ideas were generated from this exchange. Clarification of the issues was especially valuable.”

“As an adjunct faculty member, this was a wonderful orientation to many aspects of life at SJC. I learned so much about the different perspectives of each faculty member and division. Everyone should attend.”

“I see this as a pivotal event in the life of the college. We definitely need a Meeting of the Minds II. In fact, we should hold a MOM annually.”



In response, the college administration committed institutional and grant resources to support MOM as an annual activity—summer stipends for faculty, professional staff time, resource materials, and meals. In August 2002, we convened MOM II. Although the insights from our invited experts at MOM I were still fresh in our minds, we were now on our own—relying on our collective wisdom to continue the process. MOM II brought faculty from across disciplines together to revisit and clarify our success data, and to expand our shared knowledge by exploring issues in developmental learning that also affect content-area instruction. Again, MOM proved to be an effective avenue for advancing knowledge and identifying learning initiatives. As we plan for MOM III, we are reminded of its multiple benefits:

- Helps us develop a coherent plan for program improvement, based on shared understandings facilitated through interdisciplinary dialog.
- Creates a framework and timeline for the implementation of program improvements, analysis of program feedback, and continuous improvement activities.
- Provides a venue to advance strategic initiatives—focusing on common issues, gathering all relevant and important feedback, and approaching them from a variety of perspectives.
- Encourages us to ask the gritty, relevant questions about our learners and their needs to build a clear sense of direction and understanding about our work.
- Provides a cost-effective way to facilitate professional growth that is grounded in instructional practice at our college and built on shared understandings.
- Invites many voices into the process and shares collective wisdom—a positive way of recognizing that practitioner knowledge on our campus must inform our work.

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