

North Central Texas College: Foundations of an Institutional Scorecard

“Previously, we had to manually look up data and we were never quite sure we had the right figures. Now we have not only the data, but we can see those numbers in the context of where we want to go as an institution.”

– Lee Ann Nutt, PhD, Vice President of Instruction, North Central Texas College

Challenges

North Central Texas College is the oldest continually operating, publicly supported two-year college in Texas. Founded in 1924 as a rural junior college, NCTC has matured into a comprehensive, full-service community college of truly regional scope. The college, which includes three campuses serving over 11,000 students, needed to provide readily accessible data to executives so that the college leadership could make informed decisions. Not only did they need access to those data, but they needed information that was related to strategic goals to better track and enable progress. ZogoTech assisted NCTC in developing an institutional scorecard that would graphically display critical information in a succinct, easily understood, and visually appealing format. In 2011, ZogoTech brought administrators at NCTC together with Dr. Jeffrey Seybert, Director of the National Higher Education Benchmarking Institute and co-author of *The Core Indicators of Effectiveness*, for a daylong session dedicated to developing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that would provide comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of the college’s mission and vision.

Situation

Prior to integrating ZogoTech’s software, NCTC had relied predominantly on its student information system, Jenzabar (PX) POISE, to gather data on the status of the institution. Like other systems, this database was designed to collect and store data rather than provide analytics and longitudinal reporting. As a result, manual reporting was often inefficient and time-consuming. “We didn’t have a way of accessing the data we needed in order to make decisions,” says President Eddie Hadlock. “It was exceedingly difficult to collect information to gauge the success of our programs, and the data we did have usually didn’t provide enough detail.”

Access to data alone, however, was not a sufficient solution. NCTC didn’t have a way to make that data relevant to the mission and vision of the college. Even once reports were in hand, there was no way of relating those data to the overall strategic plan of the institution.

A situation in which data tied to the strategic plan was needed arose while NCTC was developing its Quality Enhancement Plan for the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges. “The QEP required the gathering of some very specific data related to college readiness, and student performance in math, history, and English,” says Lee Ann Nutt, Vice President of Instruction. “We needed to track cohorts of students through the QEP and still lacked a way of seeing that.” As David Brown, Director of Institutional Research, explains, “For years, we had ideas about institutional progress that we tried to incorporate into the strategic plan. But, we never had one report to see if those ideas were getting us anywhere.”

Solution

NCTC required that data be not only accessible but also actionable. So, the college began working with ZogoTech to create an institutional scorecard that would correlate the metrics of student performance to NCTC’s strategic objectives. ZogoTech connected the college with Dr. Jeffrey Seybert, Director of the National Higher Education Benchmarking Institute at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas.

Seybert, who has published more than 50 articles and book chapters and served as a consultant for over 100 colleges and organizations around the world, is a recognized expert in the fields of assessment and institutional effectiveness.

(continued next page)

North Central Texas College: Foundations of an Institutional Scorecard

(continued)

Having previously partnered with Seybert for the development of scorecards in higher education, ZogoTech CEO Michael Taft saw the collaboration with NCTC as a natural fit. “We’d been recommending Dr. Seybert’s work to our clients for years,” says Taft. “It made sense to begin working with him directly to help colleges use data for decision making.”

Seybert agreed to assist NCTC in creating a scorecard composed of data elements that would measure core inputs, outputs, and outcomes. Those elements, also known as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), would reflect the strategic plan and core business of the college. “One thing that has given us trouble in higher education for a long time,” says Seybert, “particularly when we talk about using a culture of evidence to make decisions, is that oftentimes, reports are highly technical and difficult for leading constituents to understand.” In order to remedy this communication barrier, the scorecard would be understandable and approachable for the college’s primary stakeholders.

With Seybert’s support, NCTC assembled a scorecard development team made up of high-level administrators. Nutt explains, “We chose to keep our involvement group very broad; there was great depth to the group, but we did not include faculty. We chose our president’s cabinet in addition to other administrators, and then set aside an entire day to determine our Key Performance Indicators.”

Seybert served as the facilitator for the daylong event during which the scorecard development team gathered to identify the college’s common values. “We were fortunate to have an external facilitator,” says Nutt, “[because] an external person doesn’t have any preconceived notions or personal agendas. Jeff [Seybert] was able to look at our institution from his own background and guide us to a decision with a fresh perspective.”

The team broke into small groups that brought together members of the college who would not generally have worked together. The groups set out to identify the most important functions of the institution, then reconvened to report on their findings. “We found that each of the groups identified essentially the same items. They were worded differently and in different orders, but we began to see emerging themes,” says Nutt. The large group was then able to decide on a set of the college’s core functions, which would guide the development of the KPIs and in turn, the scorecard.

After a lunch break, which allowed the group some shared downtime, the development team reconvened. “There was a lot of synergy and collegiality in the groups that had formed, so we capitalized on that and maintained the same groupings,” Nutt continues. Each small group was assigned one of the core functions and asked to derive key indicators that would measure that function. The groups then reported to one another on their progress, and finally, the entire team came to a consensus on the first-level KPIs.

Those KPIs were reflective of the institution’s culture and values. “We had to narrow down the KPIs to those vital few,” explains Hadlock. “Any project like this can lead to a lot of excitement, and so we ended up with a list that was much larger than what we could actually accomplish. So, we focused on the items we could make progress on, and we may amend those as time goes on.” Ultimately, NCTC settled on the first-level indicators of Access, Resources, Student Achievement, Employee Achievement, and College Readiness.

As Director of Institutional Research, David Brown was a part of that initial day and the formulation of those first-level indicators. But his real work began once the indicators had been established. By delving into the data provided by ZogoTech, Brown identified the second-level indicators that would provide quantifiable measurements of the first-level KPIs. For Access, a first-level KPI, he selected Tuition and Fees, Enrollment, Diversity, High School Market Penetration, and Market Penetration Rate as elements that would accurately indicate progress. He went through every first-level indicator in turn, determining similar measures of progress for each.

With first- and second-level indicators as a foundation, the college now had the tools necessary to create a scorecard that would display and measure the progress towards NCTC’s strategic objectives and enable the college to effectively carry out its mission and vision.

(continued next page)

North Central Texas College: Foundations of an Institutional Scorecard

(continued)

Results

With the institutional scorecard, administrators at NCTC can use information from multiple data sources to contextualize KPIs and better assess progress. The use of the scorecard enables a culture of evidence by providing users with immediate access to metrics of institutional performance.

A Clear Outline of Strategic Goals

After determining KPIs, users of the dashboard can track progress towards those indicators to better assess the direction of the college. “We can look at specific KPIs and see where we are in accomplishing our objectives,” says Nutt. “We can take a snapshot of how we are performing in relation to our indicator. The dashboard serves as a telescope that you can look through to see your vision. It lets us zoom in further and further so that we can get at the root of the problem and determine a solution.”

Same Figures, Same Goals

Brown explains that “the scorecard puts our leadership team on the same page. It streamlines the process and guides us to where we need to be, relating our progress to the strategic plan.” With a consolidated and concise measure of what’s happening on campus, administrators and faculty at NCTC can all work from the same figures towards the same goals. The scorecard serves as a common reference point for every decision on campus. “The most significant change in our culture will be in communication,” says Brown. “As we go forward, we will all have a clear sense of our goals, and when the college doesn’t meet a goal, we’ll be able to ask why. We’ll be held accountable to those indicators and will make more efficient progress as a result.”

Instant Access to a Vision of Progress

At one time, administrators would spend days extracting data from POISE and converting that information into a visually compelling format. With the scorecard, data is ready to use and is automatically in a clear and concise display. “Previously, we had to manually look up data and we were never quite sure we had the right figures,” explains Nutt. “Now we have not only the data, but we can see those numbers in the context of where we want to go as an institution.”

Team Building

Collaborating to determine the college’s KPIs gave administrators at NCTC the opportunity to reassess and refocus their common vision. “The process itself allowed the college to talk about the specific ways we could improve. Without common dialogue, there could never have been common goals,” says Brown. “Sometimes in instructional circles, we don’t want to step on our colleagues’ territory. The development process provided a brainstorming session that allowed us to talk freely and throw our ideas out there. That day was really only the beginning; it strengthened communication on campus and allowed everyone to see what was possible.” Common understanding of those possibilities has created a unified team at NCTC, composed of individuals who are all committed to the growth of the college and the success of its students.

“In coming together, we knew what our purpose was and we understood the work that was before us,” says Nutt. “The process of developing the KPIs for the dashboard was just as valuable as the outcome.”

Summary

As NCTC President Eddie Hadlock explains, “The need to have data readily available for decision making is only growing stronger. We need concise and accurate information so that we can respond to the desire to improve as an institution.” Collaborating with ZogoTech and Dr. Seybert to create an institutional scorecard enabled the college to refocus its strategic objectives and determine the metrics of success. The process of identifying those indicators, as well as the indicators themselves, has strengthened communication and insight on campus. NCTC has laid groundwork that will ensure student success and institutional excellence. “As we have grown from a small one-campus institution to a multi-campus institution, we have needed more access to information on our college,” says Hadlock. “Working with ZogoTech has allowed us to see up-to-date and relevant information so that we can quickly assess how we are performing and how we can improve.”