

HCC Institutional Student Learning Outcomes (ISLO) Focus Groups Held March 18, 2015

On March 18, 2015, HCC invited second and third year students to participate in focus group discussions centered around the college's Institutional Student Learning Outcomes (ISLO). The focus groups provided the college with a basic understanding of students' perceived competencies in the three ISLO domains: Citizenship and Diversity, Critical Thinking and Communication, and Self-Direction and Lifelong Learning.

Roughly thirty students were divided into three groups, and discussion was facilitated by HCC staff. Student responses were recorded and compiled in this document. Recurrent themes were compared to rubrics designed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities so that HCC staff and faculty could see how well students addressed the main concepts identified in the rubrics. The focus group summaries will be used to guide the development of a sustainable ISLO assessment plan, which may take the form of focus groups, nationally normed critical thinking tests, embedding ISLO in coursework, faculty professional development around ISLO, and more.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Results presented here include:

1. Summary of student focus-group responses for each question
2. Comparison of student responses and Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) VALUE rubrics for the closest learning-outcome rubric.
3. Student responses to focus-group questions

ISLO 1: Citizenship and Diversity

Students will demonstrate personal and social responsibility by practicing responsible citizenship, being open to new ideas, and understanding the value of moral sensitivity and cultural diversity.

Diversity

What does it mean to value cultural diversity?

Response themes

- Respect others
- Understand differences
- Be open-minded
- Value equality
- Recognize the common humanity of all

Comparison with AACU Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Rubric

Intercultural knowledge and competence is closest to the HCC outcome of “understanding the value of...cultural diversity.” (A separate AACU rubric exists for ethical reasoning.) A person is competent in this area when they are:

- Culturally self-aware
- Able to understand another culture in a sophisticated way
- Skillful at interpreting intercultural experiences (empathy and verbal/non-verbal skills)
- Curious – asks complex questions
- Open – develops interactions while suspending judgment

Rubric-defined attitudes and orientations of intercultural competence were present in student responses: respect, understanding, open-mindedness. Self-awareness and curiosity were not mentioned by students. The particular focus-group format used this year was not compatible with assessing students’ intercultural knowledge or skills.

Citizenship

How can someone in this country be a responsible citizen?

Response themes

- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you
- Respect and obey laws and rules, but question them when necessary
- Do things for others, especially those in need
- Be accountable for who you are and what you do
- Be involved in democracy, know and use rights

Can you provide examples from your own life?

Response examples

Examples were varied, including: standing up for and protecting others, caring for immediate others, engaging in community service, demonstrating civic values, being honest and exposing dishonesty, and being a lifelong learner.

Comparison with AACU Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric

The rubric identifies levels of performance for civic engagement including the extent to which a person:

- Understands and adapts to diversity of communities and cultures
- Connects knowledge from their academic field to civic engagement
- Clarifies civic identity and commitment as an outcome of civic activity

Adapts communication strategies to further civic action
Engages in team leadership in multiple civic activities
Works collaboratively across and within communities to achieve a civic aim

Civic engagement is a more active notion than is *being a responsible citizen*. HCC student responses focus on fundamental but self-contained rather than interactional aspects of citizenship such as obeying laws, accepting responsibility for one's actions, and living in a respectable or admirable way. Some students gave examples of more active engagement such as helping others, voting, and involvement in formal organizations for civic action (e.g., courts, media). Several responses reflect a civic identity, although not necessarily one connected to civic action.

Most students did not give examples of civic engagement as it is conventionally defined to mean action beyond an interpersonal or family context. Students did not mention adapting to diverse communities, connecting knowledge, or engaging in leadership or collaborative efforts to achieve civic aims.

What does it mean to value cultural diversity?

Responses

Respect that others' life experiences and upbringing are different
Realize that people are different but human
Life experience is valuable, equally important
One culture is not superior
Diversity of culture expands our perspective
Respect others
Accepting
Open-minded
Non-judgmental
Don't single out
All groups equal
Univ. of Oklahoma incident (fraternity song): racism still goes on today, understand that we are all brothers and sisters
On campus: people make jokes – frustrating – coaches and teachers need to do more intervention to stop
Understanding differences – in different cultures and individual differences
Gives you a larger worldview
Understanding backgrounds
Celebrating values and traditions
Seeing contributions to the world

How can someone in this country be a responsible citizen?

Responses

Caring about others' feelings
Golden rule, respect (+ 2 additional)
Follow laws and rules (+ 1 additional)
Responsible for their actions
Perceive growth and change
Doing things for others without expecting anything in return
Example: doing something good and posting it
Don't ignore, inform, especially in voting, democracy (+ 1 additional)
Everyone has a value (+1 additional)
Laws are for everyone
Military experience or corporal punishment
Inform themselves on the rules and questions them
Having values
Knowing and using your rights and options
Self-accountability
Responsibility
Carrying yourself well
Doing good
Contributing
Community service
Don't break laws
Common sense
Paying taxes
Being responsible
Don't do things
Stand up for what's right
Be a role model – respectable and respectful, have good character, work ethic
Be sincere
Push to be your best
Apply what you learn in the classroom
Be accountable (+ 1 additional)
Don't blame others

Can you provide examples in your own life (of responsible citizenship)?

Responses

Protecting youth – witness to child abuse in public (children are our future)

Being honest

Standing up for what bothers you; wrote a letter to a corporation re: racism, sexism, embezzlement

Revealing the deceit of others

Personal travel experience – people do what they can with what they have

Speaking for people who can't – the homeless, under-resourced, disabled, children

Don't tolerate "retarded"

Taking care of my surroundings

Not blaming others, taking responsibility

As oldest of 5, setting a good example

Community service

Being honest, doing the right thing

Voting

Giving positivity – supporting others, caring

Consistently learning – make yourself better

Raising kids right

Being well-mannered

Finding lost keys, returning them

Not littering

Looking out for others, stepping in where there is a need

Voting

Helping in an emergency

ISLO 2: Critical thinking and communication

Students will practice intellectual skills such as critical and independent thinking, effective communication, and knowledge acquisition and application.

Critical Thinking

What comes to mind when you hear the term “critical thinking”?

Response themes

- Questioning – inquiry, questioning assumptions, questioning yourself
- Evaluating and using evidence
- Analyzing, thinking deeply, perceiving complexity
- Creativity and innovation
- Problem-solving
- Scientific inquiry and logic

Comparison with AACU Critical Thinking Rubric

The rubric defines critical thinking as a “habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration” of issues before forming a conclusion. A successful critical thinker:

- Clearly and comprehensively considers all relevant information
- Understands and analyzes evidence; evaluates sources and experts’ viewpoints
- Examines their own and others’ assumptions; evaluate relevance of contexts
- Applies imagination to the complexities of an issue; considers limits and other viewpoints
- Communicates conclusions that are logical and that consider outcomes

HCC students emphasized inquiry or question-asking, the key to critical thinking but not a principle included in the rubric beyond the definition. All of the elements in the rubric were included in students’ definitions: using knowledge, evaluating evidence, questioning assumptions, applying imagination or creativity, arriving at logical conclusions. Students included problem-solving in their definitions, a goal orientation included in many definitions of critical thinking. Problem-solving is not part of the AACU rubric for critical thinking rubric because it is defined as a separate value with its own rubric.

Communication

What does it take to be an effective communicator?

Response themes

- Skills – enunciation, word choice, body language, eye contact
- Having something meaningful to say – knowledge and understanding of content
- Communicating in a way your audience can understand and relate to
- Listening, asking questions of audience rather than assuming
- Clarity – being clear about your points and organization

Comparison with AACU Oral Communication and Written Communication Rubrics

Oral and written communication are defined by the AACU as separate skills. Oral communication is defined as a “prepared, purposeful presentation” in which the speaker performs by using:

- Clear and consistent organizational pattern, cohesiveness
- Compelling and appropriate language choices
- Polished and confident delivery techniques
- Appropriate supporting materials
- A clear and compelling central message

Written communication is evaluated on the basis of the writer’s ability to demonstrate:

- Thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose
- Appropriate and compelling content
- Attention to conventions of the discipline or writing task
- Skillful use of credible and relevant sources
- Graceful, clear, and fluent language, error-free or nearly so

The most striking difference between the rubrics and HCC student responses is that students understood “communication” to mean “oral communication.” Many elements of effective communication are part of both forms (audience, word choice, clarity, knowledge). However, no student mentioned writing or writing-specific skills, and many responses focus on skills specific to oral communication.

Students’ understandings of oral communication are similar to the rubric, with one important addition: students felt that listening is part of communicating, an element not contained in the rubric.

What comes to mind when you hear the term “critical thinking”?

Responses

Question everything
Taking nothing for granted
Can get you into trouble (like that’s okay)
I did question faculty at HCC when I did not understand
Compare, contrast, analyze topics
Similarities and differences
Across disciplines such as history, politics, science, art
Scientific inquiry
Using an open mind to critique
Looking for concrete evidence, not hearsay, sorting through the evidence
What is causing disagreement? Questioning oneself
Giving deep thought to something
Giving things a second thought; how does it affect others?
Think hard
Common sense
Thinking outside the box, creativity
Think first, not after
Don’t overthink
Using knowledge
Think before you speak, how will what you say affect someone
New ways of doing something
Think before acting
Looking for a deeper meaning
Thinking outside the box
Thinking ahead
Problem-solving
Logic

What does it take to be an effective communicator?

Responses

Honesty

Listening

Understanding

Body language

Speaking clearly

Understanding the perspective of the person you are communicating with

Using clear meaning, speaking in a way they can understand

Being relatable

Actually talking

Intelligent conversation – being able to relay information

Effective eye contact

Enunciate words

Being able to determine the point (+ 1)

Getting your point across effectively

Knowing your audience (+1)

Confidence (based on) knowledge of subject

Honesty

Using your ears (listening) – communicating, not just talking

Being aware of details, listening to what others give you; if you don't understand, find common ground

Asking questions rather than assuming

Know what you are talking about; don't just try to prove someone wrong

ISLO 3: Self-direction and lifelong learning

Students will demonstrate self-direction, persistence, and lifelong learning.

Self-direction and lifelong learning

What are your plans after graduation?

Response themes

Student responses indicate a focus on the immediate next step. In most cases, that meant transfer to a four-year college and discussion of their intended bachelor's major. Fewer students discussed concrete career plans for life after college graduation.

Many responses mentioned continuing to play a college sport after transfer, a result of student-athletes being represented in the focus groups at a rate higher than they are in the general HCC student body.

What have you learned here at HCC that will help you meet your future goals?

Response themes

- Persistence - how to push on, how to fail and continue afterward
- Independence - how to live on one's own, be an adult
- How to learn – study skills, time management, how to approach learning (not only for facts, for understanding)
- Support and inspiration from people – coaches, professors, LSC tutors, peers, role models
- Opportunities – good transition from high school to four-year college, sports and activities, connecting with people, growing as a person

Comparison with AACU Foundation and Skills for Lifelong Learning Rubric

The rubric lists traits and skills characteristic of lifelong learners:

Intense curiosity yielding in-depth knowledge or awareness

Initiative

Independence – pursuing educational interests outside classroom requirements

Ability to transfer knowledge from previous learning

Reflection – allowing learning to change one's perspective, grow, and mature

HCC student responses indicate an orientation toward self-direction in life, with a focus on skills and the important of social relationships. The focus-group questions did not provide a way to assess orientation toward lifelong learning beyond the goal of completing a bachelor's degree. Another form of assessment would be necessary to evaluate this outcome.

What are your plans after graduation?

Responses

Transferring to a four-year college where I can continue as a student-athlete (business major)

Business/marketing double major, possibly will transfer to Penn

Student-athlete transferring to four-year college

Health science major pursuing a degree and career in athletic training, will transfer to four-year college

Education major, plans to transfer to Frostburg for K12 major

Will transfer to Towson for nursing, probably ICU specialization – has 82 HCC credits, had done ICU internship

⇒ Many students changed majors, some were sheepish about saying so

Transfer (5) to: UMUC, Salisbury, Hood, Shepherd, Bowling Green, Slippery Rock, IUP

Work

Transfer and work

Writing/behavioral science major, transfer to a four-year school (not sure which), will move to new apartment, wants to write screenplays to comment on society

Transfer to a four-year school, live on campus, get master's and then ?

Transfer to Shepherd, play golf, get a job

Transfer to Frostburg and eventually earn a master's in psychology, wants to work in student affairs (higher ed) or for a lung cancer nonprofit

Transfer to Shenandoah and play softball, get a master's, be a flight nurse

Transfer to a four-year school, start a business, maybe get a master's and live life

Transfer to Bowie or Salem, play their sport, become an athletic trainer

Transfer to Shepherd, play their sport, become a PE major

What have you learned here at HCC that will help you meet your future goals?

Responses

You need to push through things that hold you down

Valuable mentors who will communicate with you after college, ask question to help with things in personal life

Access to role models

Sports push you to keep your grades up, encourage responsibility

It's okay to fail; it makes you want to do better. Being surrounded by people who push me.

Role models that want us to succeed, think critically about who we want to be

You can't just memorize, need to understand. The LSC is helpful; people your age know more than you.

Coach and team are supportive

Take advantage of people around you and what they know

Adapting to a situation is easier than trying to change the situation (Example: MLA style is too rigid. Example: student government)

Remembering colleagues in Iraq who would have wanted to come to HCC but died; it makes me realize "I WILL finish this."

Growing by exposure to different people and cultures prepares you to be in a different position in life, but life teaches you life.

Classes: instructors who taught me how to study, how to understand the material, how to apply myself

Time management

How to take care of myself

How to study

How to live on my own, grow up and be independent

Leadership

The coaches respect and know how to work with athletes. They see a student first, not an athlete first.

Easing into college before a four-year school saves money, gives you time to decide on a major

Value of close relationships with faculty and other students

Value of sports and clubs, organizations – help you become more well-rounded, help you grown as a person, greater opportunities than just attending classes

Faculty – give life lessons (Examples of faculty members that students described as transformative: Jim Pierne in business shows students "how to succeed at life," Lori Manilla in nursing psychology taught students to reflect on their biggest failure, Mike Harsh in leadership development course)

Opportunities to meet and work with diverse people

In-class experiences that you don't get online

Initially did not have high opinion of HCC, saw it as school of last resort, but can see progress with new buildings, has met students who are here by choice, students seem more motivated than they seemed to be 4 years ago (when this student first attended HCC)

Critical comments

Not everyone will have the information to help you (Student's example: sport injury but being asked to run longer distances, felt disrespected and turned away)

In some classes, I can't apply what I am learning (Ex: Linux)

Access to facilities

Programs are not equal - some are mentioned more than others in marketing materials

State tuition funding model – it is unfair that students who live nearby in miles, but in another state, have to pay more