From: Michael Flores <rflores@alamo.edu>
Date: Tue, 19 May 2015 17:17:49 -0500
To: PAC-EMPLOYEES <PAC-EMPLOYEES@alamo.edu>
Subject: Palo Alto College Communication Regarding the Usage of Concentrations & Next Steps

Dear Colleagues:

Palo Alto College, as one of the Alamo Colleges, is an open door institution that understands that students come to us with various educational goals including earning a degree, completing a certificate, or receiving specialized training. This communication serves to affirm and clarify our current status regarding the conferring of degrees, the usage of concentrations at Palo Alto College, discuss faculty assessments of student learning outcomes, and review possible next steps.

Degrees and Concentrations
When Palo Alto College sought reaffirmation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC) in 2011, we noted the offering of four degrees: the Associate of Arts (AA), the Associate of Science (AS) and the Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degrees with areas of concentration and the Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree. According to the Alamo Colleges 2014-2015 Academic Catalog, the AA, AS, and AAT degrees are specifically designed for transfer as the equivalent of the first half of the bachelor degree requirements for most public colleges and universities in Texas. Because the AA/AS/AAT require degree programs require 42 hours in core curriculum general education courses, we offer the AA, AS, or AAT degrees with areas of concentration only.

Our practice at Palo Alto College has been to message to students that a concentration is similar to a major and provides a focused area of study consisting of a group of courses within the remaining 18 hours of the associate degree. This practice has been reaffirmed in our meetings during the 2014-2015 academic year and in recent conversations on Friday, May 8 with faculty and staff in the College Leadership Team. Our sister colleges (Northwest Vista, San Antonio, and St. Philip’s College) are currently pursuing reaffirmation and have stated to SACS-COC that they offer concentrations, not majors. As part of this process, each of these colleges, has noted that the concentration serves as a guide and may provide students with exposure to a particular discipline (through enrollment in a few courses) before transferring. I offer our sister colleges’ perspective so that it may inform our analysis at Palo Alto College. This is all part of the larger Alamo Colleges dialogue regarding the usage of concentrations and their impact on seamless transfer.

The Associate of Applied Science degrees and certificates are designed for learning specific professional/technical skills for the purposes of job or career entry or development and change. Through a sequential delivery of program courses, students develop necessary technical and workplace skills in preparation for entry-level positions. In AAS programs, students are typically enrolled in 15 hours of general education courses and the remainder of their coursework approximately 45 hours is
related to a specific discipline (examples: Aviation, Horticulture, or Veterinary Technology).

**Faculty Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes**
Assessment is key to the offering of any educational program. Palo Alto College utilizes several methods to assess and evaluate our educational programs and thereby confirm the achievement of student learning outcomes to confer a degree. These methods include faculty assessment of student learning outcomes and program review.

We stated in our 2011 report to SACS-COC that “College faculty have developed systematic approaches to specify student learning outcomes for each degree and certificate and have designed assessment measures and assessment targets for those learning outcomes.” Palo Alto College is continuously working toward ensuring the quality and effectiveness of the College’s academic programs. Again, as stated in the 2011 report to SACS-COC “Palo Alto College faculty specify student learning outcomes for each degree and certificate, design assessment measures” and “assess student learning in all programs.”

Faculty and department chairs also participate in academic program review. All academic programs are subject to program review every four years. Units undergoing program review are required to convene a representative body of faculty to complete a self-study. Performance data and outcomes are evaluated through a standard set of criteria. The end result is a narrative with supporting data that analyzes effectiveness through outcomes such as: academic program quality; general education assessment; and student outcomes assessment.

While assessment of student learning outcomes is a complex and intensive effort, it ensures our students are successful.

**Next Steps**
We must also continue to measure our progress in student success in each course and term until our students reach their goal and engage with our multiple transfer university/college partners to ensure our transferring students are well prepared. Currently, Palo Alto College students take an average of 93 college-level credit hours and 4.3 years to earn an associate degree. Our charge will be to guarantee students are able to earn their credential in a more timely manner and transfer seamlessly to the university.

Recent correspondence from Dr. Belle Wheelen at the SACSCOC dated March 13, 2015, indicated that it was part of our mission to provide the first two years of study in a 4-year degree plan and university major in response to a question regarding the need to “customize” the sequence of courses in the AA or AS degree. She also asked that we be mindful of the challenge of ensuring our courses serve as a pre-major within the AA or the AS degree that matches the various universities major.
The discussions over the last few months across the Alamo Colleges, including with the Board of Trustees, mirror Dr. Wheelan’s observations and have focused on how to ensure that students who declare an intent to transfer (by earning an AA, AS, or AAT degree) will have a maximum number of hours earned at Palo Alto College accepted toward the degree sought at the university.

I look forward to continuing this conversation at Palo Alto College as we assess the value of our current practice, and throughout the Alamo Colleges, as faculty, staff, students and the Board of Trustees seek a solution to ensure transfer student baccalaureate success.

I want to thank you for your efforts this past academic year. I know that you each ensure that our students are successful, every day and in your distinct way.

If you have any questions related to this communication, please let me know at rflows@alamo.edu or 210-486-3960.

See you around campus,

Mike

Dr. R. Michael Flores  
President  
Palo Alto College  
1400 W. Villaret Blvd.  
San Antonio, TX 78224  
210-486-3960 office  
210-486-9271 fax  
rflows@alamo.edu
From: SPC-PR <SPC-PR@alamo.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, May 13, 2015 3:10 PM
To: SPC-EMPLOYEES
Subject: Current status regarding majors versus concentrations at St. Philip's College

THE FOLLOWING IS SENT ON BEHALF OF DR. ADENA WILLIAMS LOSTON.

TO: SPC Administration, Faculty, Academic Chairs, and Staff:

This letter serves to ensure clarity and reinforce our current status regarding majors versus concentrations at St. Philip's College. On February 25, 2015, SPC submitted the SACSCOC compliance report citing the Associate of Arts (AA) and Associate of Science (AS) degrees with areas of concentration (not majors).

St. Philip’s College offers four degrees: Associate of Arts (AA), Associate of Science (AS), Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) and the Associate of Applied Science (AAS). Beginning Fall 2015 and through guidance from Dr. Bell Wheelan, President of Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) in correspondence dated on March 13, 2015, and April 29, 2015, nothing other than the degree (AA, AS, and AAT) will be listed on the SPC student transcript or diploma.

Majors and Concentrations
Majors are defined as “a coherent body of coursework within a degree program” and concentrations are not majors. Since degree programs in the AA and AS are primarily general education courses (with a State mandated 42 hours in the general education core), we offer the AA and AS degrees with areas of concentration only. The St. Philip’s College AA and AS degrees with suggested concentrations may lead to specific major areas of study at receiving institutions and some articulation agreements for specific programs of study are in place at the colleges.

In the Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degrees students are typically enrolled in 15 hours of general education courses and the remainder of their coursework is related to a specific discipline (examples: aircraft technology, culinary, automotive).

History of Academic Program Changes

- Majors were replaced by Concentrations in FY 11-12.

- On September 18, 2013, March 25, 2014, and November 11, 2014, the faculty, staff and administration were invited to participate in “Calls to Conversation,” and were provided updates on efforts being made in the development of the SACSCOC Compliance Report and the development and implementation of the QEP.

- On January 27, 2014, SPC leadership met with SACSCOC Chief of Staff, our former liaison, Dr. Johnson, in Atlanta, Georgia. In discussing the term “majors,” he stated the limited number of hours above the general education/core requirements raised concerns.

- On March 25, 2014, in a “Calls to Conversation” led by the President, Dr. Johnson’s guidance regarding the term “majors” was presented. With the entire college community invited and approximately 200 people in attendance, the SPC community arrived at a consensus that we would not use the term “majors” for the AA or AS degrees.

- During the SPC “Good-to-Great” hosted on May 21-22, 2014, SPC student government, faculty senate, staff council leadership, department chairs, and members of the president’s cabinet provided input to refine strategies for SACSCOC reaffirmation.

- On August 15, 2014, the Chairs’ Academy led by the President and VPAS focused its presentation on the distinction between Program Outcomes, Program Student Learning Outcomes, and Institutional Learning Outcomes. SPC chairs decided to develop SLO’s at the program level and appointed leads for the AA (Gregory Gonzalez) and AS (Cindy Katz).
During the SPC “All College Meetings” hosted August 16, 2014 and January 12, 2015, a synopsis of the SACSCOC implementation plan was presented to the faculty, staff and administration.

At the December 16, 2014, Board of Trustees (BOT) meeting, the issue of majors versus concentrations was discussed and there was a reset to the previous catalog.

On February 10, 2015, SPC leadership restructured the SACSCOC Report to reflect concentrations.

Currently, we are addressing the SACSCOC Off-Site Report recommendations through submission of a detailed SACSCOC Focused Report. Our Focused Report will provide evidence and documentation for noted non-compliance standards. It is important that all SPC constituents understand the history of our academic program changes. Our intent is to provide no barriers in creating flexibility for SPC students to enhance transferability of coursework.

Regards,

Dr. Adena Williams Loston
President
Subject: FW: Status of Concentrations at NVC

From: Baser, Ricky N
Sent: Thursday, May 14, 2015 8:54 AM
To: NVC-EMPLOYEES
Subject: Status of Concentrations at NVC

NVC Faculty and Staff,

As noted in my communication regarding the receipt of our SACSCOC off-site report and as we prepare for our upcoming site visit in October, it is important to ensure that our faculty and staff at NVC understands how academic programs have been consistently defined in our 2010 SACS-COC mid-term report, subsequent 2012 focus report and the 2015 reaffirmation report. As such, the definition and the supporting rationale behind serves as the baseline of a shared understanding as we are fully aware that not every NVC stakeholder participated in these discussions and activities regarding accreditation.

Our official position as transmitted to SACS-COC is that NVC offers nineteen programs of study including the Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Associate of Applied Teaching which include “concentrations” (Concentrations are not defined as majors), thirteen Associate of Applied Science degrees and three stand-alone certificates.

NVC’s programs are focused in two areas: preparing students to transfer to a four-year Bachelor’s degree program and preparing students for immediate entry into the workforce with applied knowledge and skills. We define our programs as three umbrella degrees leading to transfer: Associate of Arts; Associate of Science; Associate of Applied Teaching and the Associate of Applied Science degree with thirteen career majors and three stand-alone certificates leading to career employment.

Each of the three transfer programs designed to prepare students for transfer to university baccalaureate programs contain a 42 credit hour general education core curriculum. The general education core curriculum, if completed by a student, is fully transferable to any other Texas public institution of higher education in place of that institution’s core curriculum.

In addition to completing the core, students must complete a minimum of 18 credit hours of electives to achieve a degree. Because these courses are electives, students are provided with the opportunity to explore a variety of higher education options or to take courses that will satisfy requirements for their major requirements at the university. For the benefit of students who have chosen a concentration for their Bachelor’s degree, NVC has identified, where possible, course selection guides that identify the requirements for their major at several transfer institutions. NVC also develops transfer agreements with many of our public and private transfer partners. Those agreements provide students at NVC with crosswalks to their transfer institution and concentration of choice within our three transfer degree programs.

In a letter from SACS-COC dated March 13, 2015, it was clearly noted that the designation of concentrations or majors on student diplomas and transcripts could be perceived as misleading to the public. “First, the 2-year institution does not have control over the major a student chooses to pursue upon transfer- if even whether or not
the student continues his or her studies. Secondly, if there is no coherent body of knowledge within the AA or the AS degree that matches the “university major,” then it is misleading to the public as to the content of the degree.”

In response to this guidance from SACS-COC, the College is ensuring transparency and alignment of institutional practices. While our current practice identifies majors on transcripts, effective in Fall 2015 students who earn an AA or AS degree will only have the designation of the degree on their transcripts and/or diploma.

While the SACS-COC reaffirmation report, as well as the 2012 mid-term and 2012 focus reports reflect the College status at given points of reference, it is important that all of our stakeholders have a shared definition of how academic programs were operationally defined at Northwest Vista College. As NVC and Alamo Colleges begin the collaborative dialogue regarding college transfer, it is important for us to know where we are currently in respect to the discussion regarding our programs of study which serve a starting point in our quest to provide the best opportunities for student success.

Dr. Ric Baser, President - Northwest Vista College
May 13, 2015

TO: San Antonio College Faculty Members and Academic Chairs
FROM: Dr. Robert Vela, President
RE: Designation of Concentrations/Majors on Transcripts and/or Diploma

On May 6, 2015, I provided an update to the college community that clarified that academic programs at San Antonio College, as defined in our SACSCOC report, included four academic degree programs (AA, AS and two AAT degrees) and the 41 Professional and Technical Education (PTE) degree programs. Thus, for the AA, AS and AAT degrees, the College indicated that it does not offer “majors,” but rather “concentrations” which were intended to indicate the transfer major of students.

In a letter from SACSCOC dated March 13, 2015, it was clearly indicated that the designation of concentrations or majors on student diplomas and transcripts could be perceived as misleading to the public. “First, the 2-year institution does not have control over the major a student chooses to pursue upon transfer- if even whether or not the student continues his or her studies. Secondly, if there is no coherent body of knowledge within the AA or the AS degree that matches the “university major,” then it is misleading to the public as to the content of the degree.”

In response to this guidance from SACSCOC, the College is ensuring transparency and alignment of institutional practices. While our current practice identifies majors on transcripts, effective in Fall 2015 students who earn an AA or AS degree will only have the designation of the degree on their transcripts and/or diploma.
May 13, 2015

Dear Northeast Lakeview College Community:

This letter is to inform you that our SACSCOC application was submitted on April 27th and will go forward to the C & R (Compliance and Reports) Committee in June. The C & R Committee will review the application and decide whether NLC has provided adequate evidence for a review in Fall 2015. If the College receives a review or site visit, we will begin preparing for such during the summer of 2015. To update you and provide additional information for the academic program evaluation section, C.S. 3.3.1.1 in which “NLC identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in educational programs, to include student learning outcomes.”

We have defined some critical language at the preface of C.S. 3.3.1.1 for the purposes of discussing student learning assessment at NLC with a minimum of ambiguity. Below are two important definitions:

Program: NLC students can obtain one of three degrees: the associate of arts (AA), the associate of arts in teaching (AAT) and the associate of science (AS). Each degree path is a program and requires completion of a 42-unit core and 18 units chosen from an inventory of courses. The three programs share four learning outcomes, and each program has two learning outcomes unto itself.

Concentration: “Concentration” is a term used in the 2014-2015 catalog that allowed students to focus on a concentration while pursuing their preferred degree. Concentrations were not majors and allowed students great flexibility in the post-core courses they chose, which they did from an inventory of courses that were grouped based on discipline(s). Therefore, NLC does not offer majors to students but rather concentrations leading to Program Course Guides at the student’s selected university of transfer. Most concentrations required only one or two specific courses for completion and a plurality of NLC students (39% of 2015 graduates) elect not to define a concentration and pursue a liberal arts AA. It should be noted that subsequent to the submittal of our application, the SACSCOC did notify us that it is not appropriate to designate “transfer majors or concentrations” on student diplomas or transcripts as we confer degree awards rather than discipline-specific awards. It is important that we do not engage in any practice that could be perceived as misleading to our students or community.

Our current practice is that we are placing majors on transcripts. However, beginning in Fall 2015, in order to comply with recent SACSCOC guidance, students who earn an AA or AS degree will only have the designations of AA or AS on their transcripts and/or diploma.

I want to thank all the faculty and staff for their continued dedication to, and engagement in, our collective journey toward accreditation. The students and community appreciate all the effort and energy you have put forward in strengthening NLC to best serve their needs.

Dr. Craig T. Follins
NLC President