

Improving Communications to Strengthen Budget Transparency at South Central College

Building Awareness, Cultivating Stewardship, and Institutionalizing Practices

South Central College (SCC) is a comprehensive community and technical college located in southern Minnesota, with campuses in North Mankato and Faribault. Offering a wide range of associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates, SCC provides educational pathways in fields such as health sciences, business, manufacturing, and information technology. Known for its hands-on training and industry-aligned programs, SCC prepares students for the workforce or for transfer to four-year institutions. With a focus on student success, affordability, and community engagement, South Central College serves as a vital educational resource in the region, partnering with local businesses and organizations to meet workforce needs and foster economic growth.

Learning Through Assessment

South Central's chief business officer (CBO) recognized a need to strengthen awareness of budgeting policies, practices, and financial factors impacting the institution. While communications were frequent, and the college's small size allowed for strong connections between staff members, there was a recognition that people working in different areas have unique perspectives about resource needs and allocation practices.

The CBO modified and administered the Budget Process Assessment to better understand people's perceptions and avoid operating on assumptions. The questions were edited to better align with terminology and budget practices followed at the college. The assessment was well received, and responses were aggregated and reviewed by the CBO and a small team of colleagues to facilitate the development and distribution of communications to the campus.

Enhancing Communications

Assessment responses revealed a need to provide more information about how the college's budget is linked to student success outcomes, and how student outcome metrics inform resource prioritization.

Improvement Project

Develop and Implement a Strategic Communication Plan to Build Understanding of Budget Processes and Priorities to Support Student Outcomes

Toolkit Used

Budget Process Assessment

Results

- The Budget Process Assessment was administered to diverse campus stakeholders. Responses were analyzed to change the institution's communication plan and budget instructions, addressing gaps in understanding and clarifying points of confusion or uncertainty.
- After a subsequent budget cycle, the Budget Process Assessment was administered again, allowing South Central's CBO and their team to pinpoint areas where additional content or explanations were needed to explain how allocation decisions were made and the link between allocations and student outcomes.



“We plan to continue using the Budget Process Assessment during each budget cycle to gain insight on how the budget process is working, how communication is working and how well we are able to tie the budget to our student success strategic goals.”

.....

Roxy Traxler,

*Former Vice President for
Administration and Finance*

Respondents also indicated a need to provide more specific information about planning and budgeting processes and the data and criteria that managers and administrators use to make budget decisions.

South Central operates with a budget philosophy that resource allocations should be linked to improvements that strengthen student outcomes. Communications developed after the assessment prompted the CBO and their team to create a communications plan to share and explain pivots or budget changes to all stakeholders, including faculty, students, and staff. The plan ensures that frequent and consistent communications can be developed and shared, not just once but on a regular cycle that aligns with planning and budgeting activities.

Continuously Improving

The Budget Process Assessment was re-administered after the first cycle of improved communications. This second review allowed South Central to pinpoint areas that needed additional attention to enhance communications. Specifically, the second assessment reinforced that more detail needed to be shared about how the budget is tied to student success outcomes.

The use of the assessment helped the college develop a more student-centered budget process, build a sense of shared stewardship of resources, and improve opportunities for stakeholders to better understand what the college needs in terms of resources to improve student outcomes. With the use of the assessment and resulting improved communications from the finance office, South Central expects to make continuous improvements to how resources are allocated, how strategy informs funding processes, and how that information is shared.

Sustaining Momentum

South Central College expects to continue leveraging the Budget Process Assessment to improve communications and budget processes. The college will consider new technology options and approaches for data gathering and analysis. The use of the assessment surfaced a need for a more efficient way to gather and assess qualitative feedback from stakeholders. The college will also determine how to integrate assessment strategies and improved communications into positions so that as duties shift and staff change, the work is maintained.