The Great Data Challenge… and a Possible Solution

"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data."
Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlett* (Arthur Conan Doyle)

Data has become foundational to almost everything we do. We consider data as we reflect on how well we have helped students attain and apply knowledge; we must also review data as a means of discovering trends in enrollment, grades, completion rates, program progression, and so on. State and federal agencies require MPC to include data in reports and measures such as the Basic Skills Initiative Report, the Student Success and Equity plans, the Institution-Set Standards, and others. Finally, the college must use data to inform and support decisions to meet accreditation standards, and demonstrate that students are being served appropriately and with integrity.

Currently, MPC uses disparate data sources to house and locate information, including the Student Information System (SIS), which provides the college with scheduling, enrollment, and grade information; Escape, which tracks personnel and fiscal information; Sharepoint, which tracks Instructional Reflections; and Curricunet, which provides a tracking system for curriculum and Student Learning Outcomes. Various units on campus have also created their own systems; Human Resources, for example, tracks important information on a spreadsheet. Spreadsheets are also used by Fiscal Services and the SLO Coordinator as a means of tracking information.

So what?

Disparate systems make it harder to find and use our data. A few of the difficulties are as follows:

1. It is difficult to access and manipulate data (try using our current system to find out how many students are majoring in a particular discipline or how healthy a program is compared to five years ago!).
2. It is difficult to see how the college allocates resources based on student learning needs, as described in the reflections process.
3. It is difficult to connect the steps of the college's Planning and Resource Allocation process.
4. Information is only available to the chosen few: Information Technology, the Research Office, and those who oversee the specific data systems being used.

What can be done?

Other community colleges are now using a tool that accomplishes the following:

1. It allows users to capture data and information from many sources.
2. It allows users to use it for such things as Reflections and Program Review.
3. It provides linkages and connections for the Planning and Resource Allocation Process.
4. It increases access to data!

This tool is TracDat.

TracDat functions like a grocery store. Grocery stores receive a variety of goods (produce, canned goods, frozen products, etc.) from numerous companies, and then make these goods available to customers. Customers are not required to go to each company, nor must they rely on someone with authority to select and purchase their goods. In other words, TracDat combines data available from various sources and allows all users to choose the data they need or want.

Here's how it works:

Information is entered into TracDat.

Input -- Data			
Microsoft Documents	**Curricunet**	**SIS (or ERP)**	**Escape (and HR spreadsheets)**
Instructor Reflections	Course outlines	FTES	Personnel
Program Reflections	Objectives	Enrollment data	Budget information
	SLOs	Scheduling	
		Grades	
		Student demographics	

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Specific data is made available to all users.

Output – Used to support:
Program/Unit Information Needs   - Course by course enrollment data comparisons   - Student completion, persistence, and retention rates   - Majors information   - In-class vs. online comparisons
Program Review/Reflections and Planning and Resource Allocation   - Student Learning Assessments (Reflections)   - Action Plans/Annual Updates   - Student Achievement data for programs
Institutional Research   - Student Achievement Reports (retention, persistence, Institution-Set Standards)   - Institution-Set Standards

Note:

1. TracDat is NOT an ERP; it will not replace SIS or any management system we use for scheduling, enrollment data, and so on.
2. TracDat will become the new home for our Instructor Reflections, allowing us to address many of the usability issues with our current SharePoint form.
3. TracDat will reduce personnel's reliance on the Institutional Research Office.
4. TracDat will help the college manage quality assurance, planning, and resource allocation processes.