BRIC Technical Assistance Program

Inquiry Guide

Research and Assessment for Noncredit Colleges and Programs

bric Bridging Research Information & Culture

An initiative of the Research & Planning Group for California Community Colleges

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www.rpgroup.org

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Preface

Overview of the Bridging Research, Information and Culture (BRIC) Project

BRIC is a Hewlett Foundation funded project with a general goal to help community college faculty, staff, and administrators discover or recapture passionate, thoughtful inquiry and then use it to help students. The project hopes to encourage more people to ask a wider collection of questions, and then to use their evidence and conclusions to enhance the broader student experience at their college. One tool to promote this goal is the RP Group's collection of inquiry guides such as the one you are currently reading.

The BRIC Inquiry Guides

Collectively, the guides developed for BRIC provide a set of tools to address different areas of the college and the activities outlined in the BRIC Framework below. Where BRIC is able to serve schools directly through its Technical Assistance Program (TAP), these guides will be bolstered by facilitated conversations on the college campus during technical assistance site visits. For colleges that we are not able to serve directly through TAP, these guides can be used by the colleges to start their own campus conversations about these critical issues.

The guides have been designed to respond to the needs of college constituency groups–faculty, staff, institutional researchers, and administrators–in all areas of inquiry-based practice, including data collection and interpretation, data usage, research, planning, and evidence-based decision-making. The guides recommend best practices and strategies to promote increased and authentic use of inquiry and evidence, with suggestions for potential directions for processes, procedures, standards, and protocols. One important observation is that colleges will need to find their own fit between their campus culture and the set of possible approaches outlined in these guides. The suggestions made here are done in a spirit of collaboration and with an understanding that there are a range of tools and approaches that can result in the successful evolution of a culture of inquiry.

BRIC Framework

Institutional Domains –
What areas of the college and activities does BRIC hope to impact?

The BRIC Framework provides an organizational structure for responding to the various areas of data and information usage within a college in the following five broad domains:

- **Evaluation and Assessment**: The bundle of activities, skills, and practices a college uses to assess student learning and practices leading to student success.
- **Planning and Decision-making**: The practices a college uses to make decisions, evaluate effectiveness, and create short and long-term plans.
- **Communication**: The mechanisms and approach a college implements to communicate information at all levels and to all constituents.
- **Organizational Structures**: The processes, procedures, and policies that provide a frame or structure for college practices.
- **Culture and Climate**: The spoken/unspoken, accepted/unaccepted guidelines for behaving in a college and creating an environment that is conducive to collaboration and to effective teaching and learning.

Expected Outcomes –
What does BRIC hope to achieve?

The following five overarching outcomes are the goals of BRIC. The college will:

- **Develop Actionable Data** by applying evaluation and assessment techniques, practices, and models that are grounded in good assessment principles and result in evidence that is used to help students succeed.

- **Interpret Data through Discussion** by using research evidence and assessment data in meaningful and thoughtful discussions that leads to a wider variety of improved program interventions and classroom teaching and learning strategies.

- **Facilitate Dialogue** by employing facilitation skills in discussions of institutional research and assessment with an increased number of participants from all college constituency groups.

- **Integrate Data into Institutional Processes** by creating integrated planning strategies that are equity focused and have well-defined links to budget and other core decision-making processes.

- **Build an Inquiry-Based Practice** by developing an infrastructure for a culture of evidence that promotes thoughtful, evidenced based collaborative inquiry as a normal, ongoing activity.

Background

Noncredit instruction is an important part of the California community college mission dating back to the mid-1800s, and is an area of education that has received much attention in recent years. In 2006, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) provided an introduction to the world of noncredit in its paper entitled *The Role of Noncredit in the California Community Colleges*. In the same year the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office published *A Learner-Centered Curriculum for All Students* and the California Legislature passed Senate Bill 361, which established a uniform rate of the funding apportionment for noncredit courses and an enhanced rate of apportionment for programs providing Career Development and College Preparation (CDCP) certificates. Ensuing state-wide initiatives, resolutions, regulations, and papers by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, the statewide Academic Senate, the Legislature, and other involved stakeholders have addressed issues within noncredit instruction. The Basic Skills Initiative has also provided extra funding for both credit and noncredit basic skills programs. This increased attention has further changed noncredit instruction by highlighting the need to provide improved educational opportunities to a diverse and increasing population of Californians making use of noncredit services and instruction. Moreover, the California Education Code Section 66010.4 (http://law.onecle.com/california/education/66010.4.html) identifies noncredit instruction as an important part of the community college mission.

This inquiry guide responds to the need for addressing noncredit student learning in the ever-changing noncredit landscape. The guide will introduce components and strategies that can help colleges or programs evolve their information capacity—the institutional ability to identify, request, gather, disseminate, analyze, reflect upon, and transform data into action. For many noncredit programs, a lack of infrastructure and a dearth of opportunities to link research and evidence to planning and budgeting have been a challenge. Additionally, given the system's credit focus, a general lack of awareness of noncredit accountability measures and how campus-based research can address them has often been another challenging factor.

The strategies and solutions offered in this guide respond to specific challenges that continue to impact research of noncredit students by:

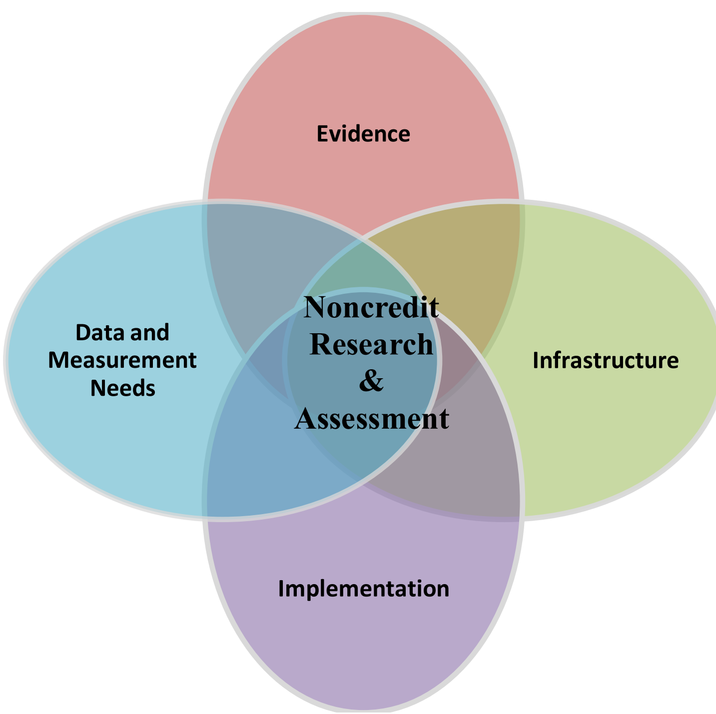
1. Addressing the complexities of gathering and measuring noncredit data
2. Focusing on current noncredit needs in assessing student learning and institutional effectiveness
3. Building a sound evidence-based infrastructure to help improve the quality and dissemination of actionable data and information
4. Creating evidence-based opportunities to improve teaching and learning

While research in noncredit does face formidable challenges, it has unique opportunities to address student learning in ways credit does not. It is perhaps the most opportune paradigm to focus inquiry on student outcomes since the credit-per-unit limitations and transfer issues are not driving forces. This noncredit guide focuses on providing concrete strategies to assist noncredit colleges and programs in addressing the current challenges faced in the everemerging world of noncredit research. This guide primarily focuses on building evidence-based information-sharing infrastructures and using sound metrics to improve teaching and assess student learning. However, in order to effectively close the information loop and to ultimately affect student learning, planning, and decision-making, stakeholders must collaborate to build information capacity through data sharing and facilitation, interpretation of information, action-based research, and collaborative inquiry. While not specifically highlighted as a structural component of this guide, building information capacity is a theme that runs through some of the components and strategies addressed in this guide. In the end, however, this increased capacity is only useful if campus practitioners are then engaged to *use* the research and insight by engaging in the meaning-making process and helping shape the evolution from information to action.

Description

This inquiry guide provides a conceptual framework containing processes, procedures, strategies, and tools to assist in the growth of noncredit research and the infrastructure needed to conduct and use such data and information. The guide should help you to: 1) maximize the use of resources that are available within and outside your institution that drive good practice, 2) use sound metrics to assess student success and progress, 3) solidify the structure and processes involved in conducting noncredit research, and 4) collaboratively use data to inform teaching and learning.

It should be noted that noncredit agencies in California may be at different stages in the development of a culture of evidence and inquiry, and they may have varying resources available. Noncredit infrastructures may take the form of an independent college, or noncredit courses and assessment may be a smaller portion of a larger credit college. Resources dedicated to noncredit research may also differ. Thus, the needs of noncredit colleges and programs may vary accordingly. The framework in this inquiry guide focuses on four components of conducting effective noncredit research that help to build information capacity and a culture of evidence and inquiry in noncredit. These components work together to serve as building blocks to improve noncredit capabilities; however, they can be used in whole or in part, depending upon the needs of a college or program.



The four components of conducting effective noncredit research:

1. The **data and measurement needs** component focuses on gathering information and optimizing its quality and integrity. Additionally, this component provides strategies to overcome obstacles in the measurement of student outcomes and progress.

2. The **evidence** component addresses current research needs for student outcomes—such as progress and student success—and offers strategies and examples for reporting within these measurement areas.

3. The **infrastructure** component provides structures and processes to help build an evidence-based infrastructure and to help manage requests for data and information, and to build venues for discussing, contextualizing, and evaluating the uses of data and analysis.

4. The **implementation of data** component provides connections to the linkage of data with budget and planning decisions, elicits reflective ways in which to turn data into action, and creates a cycle when using data to improve teaching and learning.

Impact

The framework provided in this guide provides methods to better access noncredit data, focus on current areas of noncredit research, manage the myriad requests and needs for data and information, and build a culture of evidence and inquiry. As community colleges have varying concentrations of noncredit instruction and dissimilar capacity and means of assessing noncredit instruction, it is expected that the impact of this framework may vary from college to college. However, the guide should prove useful in opening dialogue and spurring reflection on areas of noncredit instruction and student progress among faculty, administrators, and researchers, which is necessary in the effort for the continued strengthening, growth, and greater sustainability of noncredit programs.

Guided Inquiry

Institutional Snapshot

1. **Which methods of data collection do you utilize, and what other methods could you utilize? Consider both homegrown and state-mandated assessments.**
2. **How does your noncredit college or program define student success?**
3. **How does data impact decision-making processes in your noncredit college or program?**
4. **Does student data contribute to your noncredit planning regarding student success?**
5. **How would you describe your data capability? (e.g., what are your procedures for requesting data? What processes guide noncredit research? Do your processes support collaborative inquiry?) If so, how?**

Moving Forward

1. **How could data be used to improve student success and institutional effectiveness in your college or program?**
2. **What noncredit measures would benefit teaching and learning? What measures could be redefined or repurposed?**

Components & Strategies

I. Data and Measurement Needs

Colleges and programs have a need to collect basic data to monitor student progress, measure student success, and evaluate milestones to determine if students are on a successful path. They also need to be able to use accurate and effective data to meet state accountability mandates in order to receive appropriate funding for courses and to meet accreditation standards. This first component of the framework addresses the challenge of gathering and measuring noncredit data, collecting and reporting accurate tracking data, collecting basic student demographics and goal / needs data, and using data to measure student outcomes and progress.

Strategies and ideas to meet data and measurement needs

1. **Develop strategies to increase the accuracy of data**. An important component of assessing student learning is the effective collection of noncredit student data and accurate reporting to the local and state Management Information System (MIS).

    - **Explore strategies to better collect student tracking data** - Students must be able to be identified in order to effectively monitor progress and success, manage enrollment, and receive apportionment funding. However, often due to security or other concerns, students are hesitant to provide such information. College student identification numbers allow colleges to track student progress with or without linked Social Security numbers; however, the lack of a recorded Social Security number makes it more difficult to accurately report beyond a college or any linked sister colleges. If student identification is an area of concern at your institution, it may be helpful to initiate a practice of increased attention to the collection and maintenance of student Social Security numbers. Such a practice should make it easy for students to provide or update their Social Security numbers though a standard in-class application process, secure electronic keypads linked directly to your information system, or by visiting a secure online site. Implementing a promotional campaign to increase awareness can be useful in stressing to students the importance of Social Security number collection, and in increasing comfort in the provision of said Social Security numbers (see Practical Application on page 19 for an example of work being done to better collect Social Security numbers).

    - **Explore strategies to better report student data -** Much of the success and outcomes already reported in statewide reports has gaps or errors. Identifying those gaps in reporting is an important component of improving the data we already have. One such instance of a statewide movement to improve data reporting is being conducted by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges in conjunction with Association of Community and Continuing Education and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. These groups are exploring the use of progress indicators and other outcomes associated with noncredit. In doing so, this will help colleges better assess student progression and learning by building on the CB 21 coding, which is based upon rubrics developed by faculty teaching basic skills English, ESL, Math, Reading, Adult Basic Education, and Adult Secondary Education. Aligned discipline levels will track students through progressive sequences of aligned courses. A taskforce of faculty, administrators, and researchers (funded by the Basic Skills Initiative grant) have also developed a pilot project for the use of statewide progress indicators and issues related to reporting progress and success in noncredit.

2. **Collect basic student demographic and goal / need data**. Collect basic demographics, current employment, student goals, and service needs from an application, either at the start of the term in the case of managed enrollment courses or at the beginning of each class period in the case of open entry/open exit courses. Researchers and administrators may collaborate to provide input into data elements that may be added or revised to stay current with accountability requirements and improve information capacity. Another resource for the typical types of data collected about students may be accessed via the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Management Information System "Student Basic" file. The Student Basic database stores term-based and annual demographic data for all students enrolled at every college in the state that may be used to benchmark your noncredit data with other noncredit colleges or programs in the state. http://www.cccco.edu/SystemOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/MIS/DataMartandReports/tabid/282/Default.aspx

3. **Make use of surveys and focus groups**. Gather information about student satisfaction with student services and programs to gauge campus climate and get a clear understanding of whether or not students are meeting their personal goals.

4. **Close gaps in information by using multiple measures to collect and evaluate existing data**. One reason to use multiple measures is to fill in any gaps in information that cannot be entirely collected or evaluated using one method. A second purpose is to facilitate the validation of data interpretation. Stakeholders can be more confident in their interpretations of the data if several methods come to a similar conclusion. The process of collecting and evaluating data using multiple measures also helps to strengthen collaboration between research and faculty as it often can employ measures that are best collected by either party. For example, one faculty-based committee at a noncredit program is conducting research with an analyst using available resources to more globally assess the value and impact of newly implemented managed enrollment classes. The study utilizes several avenues of research:

    - Available data from student applications and attendance records to provide a profile of managed enrollment students and a picture of their attendance and persistence patterns.

- Faculty-driven collection of in-class Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems data to assess student learning gains.

- In-class student perception surveys of attendance procedures, needs met, and student-identified barriers to attendance.

5. **Make use of outside resources to supplement in-house data and information.** Some colleges have explored external licensing assessments to assess student progression and learning within a course, such as the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS), the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE), and English Literacy and Civics Education (EL Civics). CASAS testing assesses adult basic reading, math, listening, writing and speaking skills in real life situations. TABE determines a person's skill levels and aptitudes. EL Civics provides preparation and testing for students who want to become United States citizens and instruction that helps newcomers live successfully and participate more fully in their communities.

   Considerable information and support are also accessible via regional and statewide databases, research support list serves managed by professional associations/groups, and publications of current research trends, standards, and methodologies (see *Appendix A: Resources to Supplement Existing Research* and *Appendix B: Suggested Inventory of Research and Assessment for Noncredit Colleges and Programs*).

Guided Inquiry

Institutional Snapshot

1. **What strategies does your noncredit college or program utilize to collect student identification data? How is the quality and integrity of this data managed?**

2. **Describe data collection methods that your college or program utilizes to explore student learning.**

Moving Forward

1. **Based on your description of #1 above, what might your next steps be to maximize collection and quality of student identification data?**

2. **Based on your description of #2 above, what additional collection methods might you explore to meet your data and measurement needs?**

3. **What would your next steps be to begin implementing a new data collection method, and who might be involved in each of the steps?**

II. Sources of Evidence

Colleges are recognizing the need to address noncredit institutional effectiveness, to learn about how students and programs are doing, and discover why they may be succeeding or not through measurement of student learning and success. While resources within noncredit vary, metrics of success can still be achieved at several levels by gathering and analyzing student, program, or institutional evidence. The second component of the framework addresses the challenge of attending to current noncredit needs in assessing student learning and providing institutional effectiveness data. This component provides a look at some of the metrics that may be explored to assess noncredit student learning.

Strategies and examples to measure student learning

1. **Qualitative measures.** Making use of qualitative measures such as onsite surveys, online surveys, and focus groups are often important in assessing not only student progress, but the students' attitudes and values placed on learning. They answer the questions: *Have personal goals been achieved? How do students feel about a program or a service that they have utilized? What other needs are not being met?*

2. **Student Learning Outcome (SLO) assessment methods**. SLOs provide direct and indirect evidence of student learning through evidence-based assessment and research. Researchers can be vital in producing indirect evidence of student learning such as successful course completion, persistence, and tracking enrollment into credit classes. However, classroom-based assessment is also an elemental part of assessing student learning and a part of effective instructional design. Student learning can utilize assessment models facilitated by faculty within the classroom including authentic testing, portfolios, visual synthesis, and performance-based testing. CASAS, TABE, and EL Civics tests provide data that can be used to indicate student progress within terms and trends across terms. Importantly, SLOs also provide a basis for building and improving educational practices and the allocation of resources. They answer the question: *What should students do, know, or value at the completion of a course, program, certificate, or student service program experience?*

   The BRIC TAP inquiry guides *Assessing Student Learning Outcomes* and *Assessing Strategic Intervention Points in Student Services* provides an overview of the assessment cycle, essential principles and strategies for SLO assessment, and links to additional resources.

3. **Completion indicators**. Evidence-based assessment of student success and goal attainment can also be made by way of completion indicators: completion of EL Civics modules; attaining citizenship; completion of GED, high school diploma, and CDCP certificates; and matriculation to credit. All should be examined from different perspectives in order to answer the questions: *Are students attaining their goals? Are there differences in goal attainment by age? By ethnicity? By gender?*

4. **Milestones**. The use of milestones and on-track indicators assesses which milestones students are failing to reach and where students may be falling off track. Completion indicators, course progression, and other milestones can measure student progress along the pathway to an intended goal. CASAS tests also provide good pre-test and post-test measures of student learning gains within courses. Faculty and administrators can work within committees or with researchers to determine appropriate milestones and explore strategies to measure them. Milestones help to answer the questions: *Which goals are students meeting or failing to meet? At which points along the pathway to their goal are they advancing, stalling, or stopping out?*

5. **Benchmarks**. Benchmarks can be used to make internal comparisons and external comparisons to other noncredit colleges or programs. The use of benchmarks allows a college or program to establish targets or goals by comparing themselves to similar groups. Utilizing benchmarks helps to answer the questions: *How does performance of students who benefitted from a particular service compare to similar students who did not utilize that service? How do noncredit program outcomes compare to noncredit programs at other colleges and programs?*

6. **Longitudinal tracking**. Longitudinal tracking helps to assess how students are progressing over time. Common measures may include persistence rates for certificate-seeking students, migration studies that track student transition to credit colleges, trends of awards conferred, subsequent placement and enrollment within ESL sequences, and progress from ABE to ASE. The information from these data will serve to answer the questions: *Where do students initially place and how do they progress through ESL sequences? How are first-time noncredit students progressing through CDCP course pathways to noncredit certificates, credit certificates, and credit degrees?*

Guided Inquiry

Institutional Snapshot

1. **What in-house or external assessment strategies does your noncredit college or program currently utilize to measure student learning?**
2. **Who are the practitioners/groups involved in noncredit research and exploring the results?**

Moving Forward

1. **Based on your description of #1 above, what additional assessment methods could your noncredit college or program use to improve measurement of student learning?**
2. **What might your next steps be in the development of sustainable assessment structures?**
3. **What resources would you need to support and maximize student learning measurement within your infrastructure?**

III. Building Your Infrastructure

The third component of the framework addresses the challenge of building a sound evidence-based infrastructure to help improve the quality and dissemination of noncredit data and information, and to build venues for discussing, contextualizing, and evaluating the uses of noncredit data. Building an infrastructure is a process that should ideally include faculty, staff, administrators, and researchers. However, for noncredit colleges and programs that do not have a dedicated noncredit researcher, this component can be especially useful to strengthen communication and increase the flow of information. This component provides strategies for those colleges where building a dedicated research committee would help facilitate the dissemination of data and information, and for building standard procedures and forms to manage requests for data. Further work may be needed to allocate noncredit resources or to gain buy-in in the implementation of more formalized processes. However, developing a solid infrastructure can be a critical step in advancing noncredit research capability, helping to improve the quality and dissemination of noncredit data and information, and in strengthening intra-institutional communication about data. While noncredit colleges and programs may be at different stages in the development of a culture of evidence and inquiry, a solid infrastructure can be one method to advance this goal.

Many of the ideas noted below are further explained in the TAP inquiry guide *A Model for Building Information Capacity and Promoting a Culture of Evidence*. This guide also provides forms and templates associated with the processes and procedures outlined above.

Strategies and ideas for building your infrastructure

1. **Build a research committee**. Building a research committee helps to formalize request procedures and can connect requests and reporting to a research agenda and noncredit priorities. The research committee can help to prioritize ongoing and ad hoc information needs and ensure that data are linked to improving teaching and student learning, planning, and budgeting. The committee can also help to determine appropriate venues for discussing, contextualizing, and evaluating the uses of the data.

   Institutions have varying resources available to noncredit and noncredit courses and assessment may be a smaller portion of a larger credit institution. Conceivably, a dedicated noncredit research position may not exist. Therefore, the make-up and structure of the research committee may vary accordingly. The research committee can be a program committee focused on tackling a particular goal and include both faculty and a researcher. It can also be a shared governance body consisting of faculty, student services practitioners, researchers, and administrators. It can consist of both credit and noncredit practitioners and may not include a researcher at all. Regardless of the form or size, research committees can increase the use of noncredit research findings and act as a conduit to sharing information with stakeholders and/or other governance bodies.

2. **Build standard procedures and forms**. Building standard procedures and forms can help the researcher or research committee manage requests, develop a clear avenue for stakeholders to request assistance, and establish a shared understanding of the restrictions the researcher or research committee may be compelled to adhere to. Procedures and forms may include:

   - **Clear instructions as to the avenue for requesting data**, be it through a noncredit or district research office director, a research committee, or a researcher. Instructions may formally introduce forms and procedures or may simply direct inquiry to the appropriate person or committee. Communication may promote the preferred avenues or approval steps via email or inclusion in an existing newsletter or a posting on the research office, research committee, or institution website.

   - **Research request forms** help clarify, to the researcher or research committee, the purpose of the request, the type of data needed (e.g., terms needed and level of inquiry such as program/college-wide, department, or course), the primary users of the information, and the potential impact of the data (i.e., whether the information be used for program planning, outreach, or enrollment management). These forms are also a good starting point to establish stronger communication and inquiry between the researcher and involved stakeholders.

   - **Guidelines regarding data security and protection, data use, and dissemination of data by stakeholders** help establish a shared understanding of the magnitude of data sensitivity and the extent to which data should be protected. These guidelines may require signatures of both the primary requestor and a managing administrator to ensure compliance with the principles, confidentiality, use, and dissemination of the data and to ensure that the request is linked to a research agenda, other noncredit initiatives, or budget planning.

   - **Investigator guidelines for research involving human subjects** protect noncredit students involved in research conducted by graduate students or other external researchers. All external research should have a request procedure that is created and implemented under the auspices of a governing body or a committee. The procedure to obtain approval to conduct research need not be a lengthy process; however, some document should exist to address the requests that come up from time to time. The document should describe the types of research that are exempt from, and require review by, the reviewing committee; the degree of review necessary; and the proposal process for research that is not exempt from review. It should also include a signature page that attests compliance by the principle investigator.

Guided Inquiry

Institutional Snapshot

1. **What processes and procedures do you currently have in place to manage ongoing noncredit research? How are ad hoc requests handled?**

2. **How widespread are the usage of these processes and procedures? How effective are these efforts?**

Moving Forward

1. **Based on your description in #1 above, and keeping in mind the culture in which your noncredit college or program operates, what challenges exist to the integration of these infrastructural elements within noncredit?**

2. **Which infrastructural elements, processes, or procedures could be implemented to better manage the use and dissemination of data?**

IV. Implementation of Data

The fourth component of the framework addresses the challenge of linking data with budget and planning decisions, eliciting reflective ways in which to turn data into action, and creating a cycle for using data to improve teaching and learning. Some of the strategies suggested below are explained in detail in the BRIC TAP inquiry guide *A Model for Building Information Capacity and Promoting a Culture of Inquiry* and easily translate to noncredit needs.

Strategies for the implementation of data

1. **Research agendas** can help to outline and prioritize data and information needed and measure progress toward achieving prioritized goals. A research agenda can be used by the researcher, research office, or research committee as a means of organizing and prioritizing internal and external commitments and linking research to noncredit plans and initiatives. Research agendas may be used to provide for noncredit programs or college-wide initiatives. They may also be used at a more local level between researchers and stakeholders within the development process of a project (e.g., collaboration with a steering committee to establish the scale and scope of the research needs, outline individual goals and priorities, and measure progress toward stated goals).

2. **Action research approach**. Action research is a collaborative inquiry process of continuous feedback and cyclical investigation, planning, and action. This approach elicits reflective ways in which to turn data into action and helps to close the loop when using data to improve teaching and learning through research, evaluation, and assessment that respond to the need for linking data to planning decisions. This approach facilitates the use of noncredit data among researchers, faculty, student service practitioners, and administrators that builds an atmosphere of collegiality and further

supports the process of planning via dissemination of noncredit research. Action research approaches can include workshops (such workshops with faculty on the availability of data or workshops with faculty to integrate data with program review) and the utilization of research briefings to disseminate information in an environment dedicated to discussion of outcomes, interpretation of the information, and repeated inquiry. The action research approach should involve dialogue that validates the data and determines how it may be implemented at all levels.

3. **Establish and develop regular program review process that utilizes the action research approach**. Noncredit programs have a need to establish regular data reporting because, without it, they are at a major disadvantage compared to credit programs. Among other challenges to noncredit are validating and increasing awareness of measures that may be unfamiliar to or unaligned with the credit side, which may affect funding and budgeting decisions. Noncredit can overcome this challenge by establishing and developing a regular program review process that includes validated performance indicators that can link data to planning and decision-making. Research provides critical evidence in the evaluation process. Faculty-driven or student services practitioner-driven program reviews are essential in assessing the health and functioning of the noncredit college or program and can benefit from taking an action research approach. Workshops facilitated by a researcher or research committee member on how to use and evaluate available noncredit data and integrate the information into planning and decision-making can be valuable for improving program or service quality and student learning. While noncredit program review will differ somewhat in key performance indicators from credit instruction, the broad-spectrum process is well explained in the BRIC TAP inquiry guide *Maximizing the Program Review Process*.

Guided Inquiry

Institutional Snapshot

1 **Which groups or initiatives might benefit from a research agenda?**

2 **What is the current climate on your campus toward action research?**

3 **What is your current noncredit program review process? Which programs and stakeholders are involved, and what is their role in the program review process? Has there been recent discussion surrounding expanding or re-evaluating your program review processes?**

Moving Forward

3 **Thinking of one group or initiative in particular that would benefit from a research agenda. How might you begin the process of implementing it?**

4 **What role can you play to strengthen action research and program review?**

5 **Which other constituency groups on campus might benefit from the action research approach?**

6 **How might you begin to integrate the program review process with the action research approach?**

Practical Application

This practical application section reviews examples of some California community colleges that have designed or implemented sound practices to maintain or improve research practices for noncredit.

1. **Data and measurement needs - Social Security number collection strategies**

   Some important data that has been elusive for noncredit colleges and programs is dependent on the ability to identify and track students. Tracking student wage increases through the Employment Development Department cannot be accomplished without knowledge of students' Social Security numbers. Without a single common cross-institutional student identifier, tracking student movement from noncredit to credit is challenging.

   North Orange County Community College District School of Continuing Education developed an initiative called "You Count." In this initiative, faculty were trained to explain the importance of student identification numbers and the confidentiality of the submission process with each class they teach. Envelopes and forms were distributed to all students that allowed them to confidentially submit their Social Security numbers. In addition, posters were made to make students aware of the issue and encourage them to consider the benefits of reporting their Social Security numbers.

   You Count Campaign:
   http://sce.edu/news/index.php/ar/2008/11/20/you-count-at-sce-campaign

   Letter to faculty:
   http://sce.edu/news/media/blogs/ar/FacultyYouCountletterJuly2009.pdf

2. **Infrastructure**

   College of the Desert has created a solid infrastructure to address basic skills research within the context of the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI). They have created a BSI Task Force on Research and Academic Improvement tasked to create a research agenda to address one of the BSI research objectives. The agenda describes their infrastructural philosophy. Included in the agenda are a mission statement, values statement, and identification of key performance indicators focused on closing the loop between research and action through dissemination of data. Data sets and sources of information needed to create a research agenda are addressed. Regular reports on the progress of cohorts are developed and processes for additional research requests are implemented to assist in longitudinal research. Steps for the gathering and provision of data are described, including training for key groups to help disseminate data, evaluate outcomes, and make targeted changes in identified problem areas that exemplify action research.

   BSI Strategic Goal: Objective #1:

http://www.collegeofthedesert.edu/fs/bsi/Pages/BSIObjective1.aspx

Research Agenda:
http://www.collegeofthedesert.edu/fs/bsi/Pages/BSIResearchandData.aspx

3. **Implementation – action research**

The ESL Persistence Committee at the Mid City campus of San Diego Continuing Education (SDCE) includes a core group of ESL practitioners who created and implemented a pilot study to assess the value and impact of newly implemented managed enrollment classes. The committee looked at their findings, disseminated an article that discussed their findings, and developed strategies to make appropriate changes. A district researcher was asked to facilitate the research planning and inquiry process with the committee as they broadened the focus of their research to assess and improve the functioning of managed enrollment courses at Mid City. Working collaboratively, the group identified three areas of interest and conducted fact-finding to allow for better analysis. The committee used a research agenda as a support structure that determined research questions, outlined and prioritized the areas of information needed using multiple measures, and linked the information to noncredit plans and initiatives. Planned efforts are currently underway to further the cyclical process via examination of existing data, design and implementation of an in-class student survey, and assessment of existing CASAS data. Research findings will be promoted and disseminated to key stakeholders to open discussion, evaluate current strategies being used in managed enrollment planning, amend current strategies as needed, create new strategies to improve managed enrollment processes, and implement the decisions that are made.

Evaluation

One method of evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies suggested in this guide at your noncredit college or program is to first identify key stakeholders and leaders who would be involved in the decision making and implementation of selected strategies. Stakeholders can then work their way through the guided inquiry questions to identify their strengths and opportunities for growth, strategies for growth and sustainability, key milestones that may occur along the way, and expected outcomes once strategies have been executed. Recording these realizations and actions in an action plan has two benefits. An action plan can help to strategically plan and execute the strategies selected. The action plan can also be used down the road to open discussion surrounding the effectiveness of the efforts, whether milestones were achieved, or where efforts stalled. Identified outcomes can be listed and measured by stakeholders using a performance scale.

Another evaluation method is to gather faculty, researchers, and administrators to create and validate a rubric that describes four levels of functioning in each of the areas identified as being integral to conducting effective noncredit research: data and measurement, evidence, infrastructure, and implementation. Stakeholders can assess the college or program's level of functioning and growth pre- and post-implementation. The findings from this effort can be shared with the faculty and leadership to highlight strengths, identify areas for growth, and stimulate discussions.

Appendix A
Resources to Supplement Existing Research

- **California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Websites**
    - California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) http://www.cccco.edu/
    - CCCCO Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC) http://www.cccco.edu/ChancellorsOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/ResearchandPlanning/ARCC/tabid/292/Default.aspx
    - CCCCO Reference Materials (CDCP in the State: Supplement to the ARCC Report, Noncredit at a Glance, etc. http://www.cccco.edu/ChancellorsOffice/Divisions/AcademicAffairs/InstructionalProgramsandServicesUnit/Noncredit/ReferenceMaterials/tabid/532/Default.aspx
    - CCCCO Report on Basic Skills Accountability for the California Community College System http://www.cccco.edu/ChancellorsOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/ResearchandPlanning/BasicSkills/tabid/1660/Default.aspx

- **Data Sources**
    - California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDs) http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/
    - California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS) http://www.cal-pass.org/
    - CCCCO Data Mart http://www.cccco.edu/ChancellorsOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/MIS/DataMartandReports/tabid/282/Default.aspx
    - CCCCO Data on Demand (password required) https://misweb.cccco.edu/dataondemand/

- **Organizations/Centers**
    - Association of Community and Continuing Education (ACCE) http://acceonline.org/
    - California Association for Institutional Research (CAIR) http://www.cair.org/
    - National Community College Council and Research Planning (NCCCRP) http://www.ncccrp.org/
    - The Research and Planning Group (RP Group) http://www.rpgroup.org/
    - The Community College Research Center (CCRC) http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/

Appendix B
Suggested Inventory of Research and Assessment for Noncredit Colleges and Programs

- **Enrollment management**
  - Enrollment tallies - These tallies would ideally identify basic course information and classifications, assigned faculty, student enrollment and attendance hours, and course productivity such as class size, FTES, teaching hours, faculty contact hours, etc.
  - FTES outlook - This projection might employ a forecast model to estimate FTES for the upcoming year and at intervals throughout the year.

- **Research Reports**
  - Noncredit to credit migration (transition) reports
  - Campus climate surveys
  - Annual report to the community or fact book - this annual report might include an overview of the institution's background, mission, goals, etc.; headcount and student characteristics; productivity (FTES, enrollments, attendance); student outcome information; awards conferred; student transition; human resources, etc.
  - Annual faculty and staff professional development needs assessments
  - Point-of-service surveys (DSPS, Admissions, Counseling, etc.)
  - Employee perception surveys
  - Student satisfaction surveys

- **Student Profiles**
  - Student demographics
  - Employee-student demographic comparisons

- **Program Data**
  - Student demographics by discipline
  - Program review reports of primary departments

- **Student Outcomes**
  - ARCC reports - final ARCC report, ARCC self assessment, ARCC board presentation
  - Awards conferred
  - Basic skills progression
  - Student learning outcomes and assessments

BRIC TAP Inquiry Guide Series

1. Assessing Student Learning Outcomes
   Primary Audience: *Instructional Faculty*

2. Using an Equity Lens to Assess Student Learning
   Primary Audience: *Instructional Faculty, Student Services Staff*

3. Assessing Strategic Intervention Points in Student Services
   Primary Audience: *Student Services Staff*

4. Assessing Institutional Effectiveness
   Primary Audience: *Institutional Researchers and Administrators*

5. Assessing Basic Skills Outcomes
   Primary Audience: *Instructional Faculty*

6. Maximizing the Program Review Process
   Primary Audience: *Instructional Faculty, Institutional Researchers*

7. Turning Data into Meaningful Action
   Primary Audience: *Institutional Researchers*

8. A Model for Building Information Capacity and Promoting a Culture of Inquiry
   Primary Audience: *Administrators, Institutional Researchers*

9. Assessing Non-credit Programs and Institutions
   Primary Audience: *Faculty, Institutional Researchers and Administrator*