The inside story on how President Obama’s campaign visit to the Lowry Campus two days before the Nov. 6 election went from conceptual idea to completion in the span of 96 harried hours

At about 11:30 p.m., on the night of Wednesday, Oct. 31, the cell phone of Tami Morrissey, Community College of Aurora’s Assistant to the President, buzzed her out of a deep sleep.

Regina Edmondson, the college’s Associate Director of Development, related that someone of significance had been trying to reach CCA president Alton D. Scales but had initially been unsuccessful.

“You’re going to be getting a call in the next few minutes from Obama campaign people,” the message to Morrissey read.

Once the cobwebs began to melt away, Morrissey began wrapping her mind around what was about to potentially unfold. “I thought, ‘Here we go ...’”

Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang and on the other line was Jen Polenzani, regional event organizer for President Barack Obama’s campaign, asking if CCA could host a rally at Lowry on Sunday evening.

It was mentioned that Obama’s on-the-ground team already had scouted the location clandestinely Wednesday and believed the site was perfect.

“They were looking for a venue in Aurora, because they really didn’t think that they’d hit Aurora,” Morrissey said of her half-hour phone conversation.

The Obama campaign also wanted a locale that could accommodate 6,000-8,000 people and assured Morrissey that their plans included an outdoor venue, which put Lowry in play.

Morrissey responded that she would help organize the officials necessary for a meeting the next morning that would include Scales and Nancy McCallin, President of the Colorado Community College System. Both executives had the power to either rubber stamp or reject the idea.

Morrissey, who’s worked at CCA for 19 years, had a somewhat unusual thought pop into her head as she hung up the phone. “They finally found us,”
No direct ties to college sold deal

From Obama / Page 1

she noted.

Several years ago, President George W. Bush had his motorcade stop at a restaurant a stone's throw from the CentreTech campus. It was then that Morrissey and then-school president Linda S. Bowman hypothesized that one day the nation's chief executive would visit the college.

"Because we're great, first of all," Morrissey explained. "And they talk a lot about community colleges and we are an easy stop with our location near Buckley (AFB). They've been out a few times over the last few years. I've talked to White House advance people about holding events here, but our inside event footprint isn't large enough for anything that they do."

In fact, just days before the Obama camp hit Lowry, representatives of former President Bill Clinton reached out in an attempt to find a suitable rally spot. CCA had to decline since it didn't have an indoor facility that could hold several thousand people. So Clinton's campaign tour instead came to Adams City High School on Oct. 30.

Thursday, Nov. 1

Scales and Morrissey connected at 6:40 a.m. The latter wasted no time getting right to the point: "I don't know if you've seen your e-mail yet but the advance team wants us to use our campus for a rally for the President."

Scales paused. "Obama?" laughing heartily as he thought back to the conversation.

His mind then immediately jumped to the conversation with the Clinton representatives only hours before. "I thought, 'Man, where do I live? Where did I land?'" said Scales, who took over his current role in July. "This is too cool."

But that initial buzz turned to the reality and scope of his position as head of the college. Never mind that Scales was scheduled to attend an Aurora Economic Development Council retreat beginning that afternoon and running through Saturday morning. There also would be professional considerations that had to be carefully explored.

There was initial trepidation that it would be perceived that the college had a political stake, which was unacceptable. Part of Scales' role is to help maintain and shape the image of CCA and it was paramount the institution wasn't seen as taking a partisan role.

Such judgments would be made at a 9:30 a.m. meeting at the Todd Bergren Room at Lowry. Morrissey, Scales, Rhonda Bentz, CCCS' Director of Public Information and Legislative Coordinator, and two Obama staffers, including Polenzani, attended the initial briefing.

Scales quickly decided that the campaign would use the college's facility much like any other organization and that "there would be no markers suggesting we were sponsoring them." Bentz agreed. CCCS' regular events contract also would be used to "create the paper trail to demonstrate that," he added.

A second, 11 a.m. meeting was scheduled to begin the planning stage. The Bergren Room had a cancellation, so Morrissey approached Traci Fielden, administrative assistant at Lowry, about booking it.

"I asked her what I should call the meeting," Fielden recalled. "She said, 'Umm, communications ...' So that's what I went with. I didn't know what was going on until the 'suits' arrived and said, 'Good morning, ma'am. I just knew they were Feds.'"

Still, nothing was remotely official, even as more people would be let into the loop.

The second meeting was more logistical and featured about 30 people, including the original group along with Secret Service, additional campaign personnel, CCA's Lowry facilities manager Mike Davis, Director of CCA Communications Liz VanLandingham and CCCS VP of Finance and Administration Mark Superka and others.

"I was very surprised, to say the least," Davis said when he first heard the name Obama linked with a CCA visit at that meeting. "Here at Lowry? ... I thought, 'Vice President maybe, not Commander in Chief.'"

Yet the Presidential event was a go, for now. "I said yes," Scales said. "They said yes tentatively."

But until Obama campaign central headquarters in Chicago signed off, nothing was set in stone. Lawyers began working a contract and negotiating a fee, while the rest of the operation went into the Lowry quad, split into groups and began scouting buildings to see how long it would take to secure the location.

Scales briefed Annie Trujillo, principal of the New America School, once it became apparent that its building would be a key instrument in getting the President in and out safely.

Cody Neuhold, property manager of CCCS, and Lowry security officer Daniel Baniszewski were among those answering questions for the Secret Service.

But this was just the beginning of trying up what would be a kindergarten class sized group of loose ends at this early juncture.

"Poor Tami," Fielden said. "She needed help and couldn't tell anybody. She couldn't even give me a hint. I felt bad for her. It was quite an interesting time."

Morrissey began to make inquiries to Sandra Tompkins, CCCS' Director of Information Technology, but was simultaneously specific and vague. Was the quad covered by wireless? Could an Ethernet cable be strung in the middle of the grass?"

"She's thinking, 'You crazy woman ... I didn't think she was crazy,' Tompkins responded. "Instead I thought, 'That's interesting. There must be some sort of event over there but I don't know what it is.'"

And as the day progressed, Tompkins related, there was more "various and sundry questions and apologizing" from Morrissey. CCCS IT was also receiving Morrissey's flurry of cryptic inquiries: all day, all evening.

"Every time she called I was thinking about something else, so I didn't put a whole lot of thought into it," Tompkins said. "But it was odd and as the day went on, I started thinking, 'I better find out more information because this seems a little bit bigger than just curiosity.'"
Late Thursday night, Morrissey received a note that the contract was officially signed and the event was official. Obama’s campaign asked that no information be released until a press statement was distributed, so only a handful of CCA officials and staffers knew it was a ‘go.’

Morrissey had been planning a vacation at the end of the following week and now knew her weekend of leisurely packing for the trip was a goner.

“That’s when I started thinking, I’m just going to buy new clothes instead of finishing the laundry because I’m never going to get this done.”

Friday, Nov. 2

The story hit the Denver Post’s online edition on Friday morning, so the public finally knew what only a select group had for nearly a day and a half.

But up in Vail, where Scales had opted to travel for the second day of the economic development council meetings, everyone still was in the dark about the weight of events that had kept Scales away in the first place.

Morrissey texted Scales at an early-morning meeting to alert him the contract was signed and word was beginning to filter out publicly that Obama was coming on Sunday. Lisa Luciano, from Raytheon, announced the President’s visit to the Aurora business leaders after Scales told her what had been occurring behind the scenes.

Meanwhile, activity would begin to percolate around Lowry, even with Scales miles away – and not sweating his absence a bit.

“Here’s what I learned,” Scales explained. “You know my very first day was July 20 (the day after the Century 16 shootings in Aurora) and in that moment I learned the fiber of the people we work with and what they’re made of. And since then, I’ve had the opportunity to observe individuals in their day-to-day walk, and I knew with Tami on point, it was going to be...
OK. So I trusted in that moment then, as well as now, in the competence of the people around me.”

One of those people intimately involved at Lowry would be Tom Wolf, director of security of CCCS. His office is a stone’s throw from the Lowry quad, and he was informed Thursday – his day off – of the possibility of a Presidential visit but really sprung into action once official word hit right around the time Scales was informed.

Wolf’s initial thought: “Of all the schools, of all the places he could go in the metropolitan area and he picked our school. It didn’t seem real. It felt like somebody was playing a joke on me at work and I was going to get a call later saying, ‘We just wanted to see how you would react.’”

Reality immediately sank in, though, once he began receiving calls from Secret Service and was briefed on their needs and their requirements from Wolf’s staff.

Manpower needs were an initial fear Wolf had working with a small security staff at Lowry, but the campaign made do with what was provided.

It didn’t hurt that the Secret Service already had coordinated with
Quad makeover happens quickly

From Obama / Page 4

Aurora Police Chief Daniel Oates for some 250 police officers that would eventually flank both Lowry and the Obama motorcade at Buckley for the trek to CCA.

It was that afternoon Wolf learned that the stage would abut the back of the New America School and communications people would be setting up in Building 905. That Ethernet connection Morrissey had earlier requested was to be used for a direct link to the White House the night of the event. Media would have a designated area to file stories and risers for camera equipment to the west and south of the as-yet erected stage.

“I hung back, watched and observed,” Wolf said. “And it was very impressive.”

Tompkins and the numerous computer department staffers also met at Lowry quad in the afternoon and began working off of the specific guidelines given by the Obama campaign regarding wireless download speeds, access points and hard line phones -- not voice over internet for security purposes -- which CCA lacked.

“Essentially we had to start from scratch,” Tompkins said. “We went over to Lowry to meet this (campaign) guy. We showed him the (server) closets and he had Century Link out there within an hour. I have never before in my life seen Century Link respond that fast. They were right there.”

Six hours of testing connectivity to the quad followed.

But the real work was just getting started.

Saturday, Nov. 3

The bulk of the materials to set up the quad were delivered in the early morning hours. And over the course of the day, Wolf described the transition of the quad from empty grass into a ceremonial space as the equivalent of a time-lapse photography shoot.

Morrissey worked most of the day ensuring meeting space for whoever needed it. Tompkins and her team ran cables to guarantee enough wireless access points.

“When we showed up at 9 a.m. there was barely anything there. By the time we left at 2:30 or 3 in the afternoon, there was so much set up,” Tompkins said. “There were bathrooms everywhere and platforms for

Clockwise from left, a family squeezed against the first row barrier to get a close-up view; President Obama applauds the crowd as he enters the catwalk; a strident point is made during the speech; Obama works the crowd after the event, going from one side to the other and shaking hands with people in the first two rows behind the barriers; CCCS head of security Tom Wolf shows a certificate given to him by Secret Service by wearing a small pin that also was given to him by Obama’s security detail.

See Obama / Page 6
Scales: National news for something positive

From Obama / Page 5

the press.”

To accommodate the computer needs, about 10 devices were moved from adjoining buildings to cover the quad.

Morrissey also was working behind the scenes to guarantee that the 50 VIP tickets allotted to CCA were properly allotted to board members, CCCS staff, the college advisory council, Foundation committee and school vice presidents.

By Saturday night, flags were raised, lights were on, stages constructed, barriers placed. Speakers had been set up and busses parked in a line to provide a secure perimeter.

Security and Secret Service closed off several lots and roads, as tents were erected in the middle of Seventh and Boston, which would later be used for searching incoming guests.

“It was becoming more real,” Morrissey said.

For Scales, who would drive back to Denver early that morning, that reality now meant a pre-planned meeting with Obama on Sunday night.

He was informed by the lead of the campaign’s advance team that the introduction would take place. The gravity of the situation hit him, despite his having gotten to meet George H.W. Bush and Democratic nominee John Kerry at previous college stops.

Back then, Scales said, he was sort of an “understudy” in the whole production. But the stakes professionally and personally he knew would be different this time.

“There will never be another first African-American president. So that was a piece of history I would get to take. The other thing, as I was processing it all, I was thinking about my son and my daughters and what I believe is important pieces to continuously feeding them about our responsibility in voting.

“It was an opportunity to capture an image and make it very real to them.”

Sunday, Nov. 4
There was enough window dressing by Sunday morning that made it blatantly obvious a major event was taking place. But, for Wolf, that moment became abundantly clear about noon when a group of black cars arrived en masse in front of Lowry.

Out stepped Secret Service, donning black suits and earpieces.

“I’m like, ‘That’s the crew. We’re in good hands now. The campus is going to be as safe as it’s ever been, no doubt.’”

Some concerns had arisen over projected crowd numbers of 20,000-25,000 and what that meant for the parking situation. More lots were cleared for dignitaries.

The Obama campaign was responsible for invitations meted out to assorted senators and congressmen along with Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper.

Meanwhile, all media had been advised to have their TV trucks parked in the lot north of the quad by 3 p.m.

A security sweep would leave the majority of the quad area off limits until about 6 while bomb-sniffing dogs went through buildings 901, 903, 905 and everything from news vans to fire trucks to ambulances.

Davis tagged along as the meticulous search unfolded. Every drawer in every office; engine and side compartments of the busses; custodial closets — nothing was glossed over.

Davis even changed the access codes to lock off building access, save for a few select doors. Card keys for employees no longer would work. But the presence of Davis in his office when sharpshooters arrived with Aurora SWAT was one unplanned surprise, quickly rectified. Davis led them to roof access at 901 and 903, an experience he’ll always remember.

“Three of them had massive backpacks on,” he said, adding with a laugh. “I assumed those weren’t pool cues in the bag.”

A few people trickled by the site around noon. Crowds began gathering around 4 p.m. and kept growing until 7:15 p.m., when the gates would be declared open.

Morrissey actually stood in line for 21/2 hours with the rest of the crowd, which snaked all the way from Boston through various side streets, ending near the Lowry Gymnasium.

“I was surrounded by people from Aurora,” she recalled. “Some people still lived here, some did not, but they grew up in this area seeing the Air Force base. Some of them had attended CCA, and just to hear their stories and how much it meant to them, it was kind of cool.”

The line was held up in small part by a lengthy sound check by the event’s musical guest, Dave Matthews, frontman of the Dave Matthews Band.

He was having trouble, the singer related later, with an echoing issue in his earpiece.

Davis and some of the computer personnel from CCA and CCCS had made it into the quad for last-minute checks, too, but others were held outside by security. It was then that Eduardo Peralta and Tomkins, CCA co-workers, walked into 903, past some police and Secret Service after explaining their role setting up wireless access.

Their search for Daniel Bapple, another IT employee at CCA, instead led to a chance encounter in the Bergren Room.

Tomkins at first didn’t recognize Matthews, but Peralta did and pounced at the opportunity to take a picture with the musician, who graciously obliged.

“I was like, ‘Wow, that’s Dave Matthews,’” Tompkins recalled. “So I took a picture of the two of them. Then, I said, ‘Gosh, it would be cool if I had a picture, too. I’d really like one.’ So Dave Matthews came over and just threw his arm around me and was just giving me a hug. ... It melted away any tiredness I’d had.”

The process went smoothly once the lines of people were allowed to enter the quad. It took about an hour and 15 minutes to let anywhere from 15,000-20,000 people into the quad, depending on whose crowd estimate was used. People even placed their trash next to garbage cans instead of-strewing it about Lowry campus.

As Scales navigated first from his car, then on ground, making his way to his seat, he also listened to the buzz from those walking on CCA’s campus, some for the first time.

“I was thinking we’re going to be on national news for something positive,” Scales maintained. “This is going to aid in telling our story because people now have an anchor, a reference point about the college. I’m thinking that really part of what we should be doing is what I said to the staff all along is looking at ways at bringing individuals through our doors, down our hallways, who would normally just drive past us.

“So we had a group of people on our campus that had never been here. Some didn’t even know where it was until that event. So what it did is we got a lot of capital out of that.”

Wolf, as one of the main security officials, got to see another side to the nation’s Capitol and its inner workings. He was asked to shadow the top Secret Service agent assigned to the event. So he knew how the technical aspects were going to unfold long before Obama’s plane was close to landing.

At the front of the New America
The entire handshaking pit stop lasted about three minutes. The last half-minute or so by Obama was devoted to Scales.

"I said, 'Hello, my name is Alton Scales and I'm the President of Community College of Aurora.' His response was, 'Thank you for hosting us, and I want you to know that community colleges are extremely important to us and we will do everything we can to support what you do.'"

The words were fitting for the moment and audience. But what struck Scales was how tired the President had looked as Obama hit his fourth state that day.

But, as Scales remarked, the moment Obama exited the back of New America School and set foot on the catwalk into the open air, it was his posture immediately was inflated, as if through a tire pump.

Neighborhood team leader for Obama's grassroots campaign, Mike Davis, got the crowd jazzed just before the President took his first outdoor steps onto the stage. Obama went right past Morrissey, who was pressed against the fence at the rear of the stage. Scales would go back to his VIP seating, off stage left. Peralta and Tompkins watched from the riser next to the West Quad building.

Wolf stood near the back of the stage wearing a security pin bestowed upon him by the Secret Service. (The look of the pin, understandably, changes every event.) Davis took a position behind the assembled crowd.

"It was the smoothest event I've worked and I've been doing it for 15 years," Wolf remarked.

Scales got one more brief audience with Obama as he made his way around the first row of the fenced-in crowd, surrounding the stage, after the speech.

And on the way back, Morrissey, who thought for years an American President would come to CCA, shook Obama's hand.

"Support him. Don't support him. It's the office. He's the President of the United States, regardless of who was standing up there. That's the piece, to me, that was most amazing," Morrissey said.

She expressed confidence that the hard work and the long hours put in by countless people resulted in an event for which CCA could be proud.

But, there was another twinge of happiness that the event had ended, too as Obama was whisked away and the crowd quickly dispersed.

"Oh yeah," Morrissey said emphatically. "I could go do my laundry now."
A candlelight backdrop accompanied the dedication of four trees to four slain CCA students at a Nov. 14 memorial.

EMOTIONAL RELEASE

Memorial ceremony fondly recalls four CCA victims, looks forward

A Nov. 14 memorial service at Community College of Aurora simultaneously merged remembrances of four late students lost in the Century 16 tragedy with the ongoing resilience of an Aurora community still dealing with the fallout from the tragedy nearly four months after the fact.

“We, as survivors, won’t be defined by a moment of time,” college president Alton D. Scales promised in his remarks to a large crowd at the Student Center Rotunda.

As photos of Micayla Medek, Alexander “A.J.” Boik, Rebecca Wingo and Jonathan Blunk sat on easels in the front of the room, family members, representatives from the Aurora police and fire departments, CCA staff, administration and faculty listened to music, words both solemn and poignant and a sense of determination filled the packed space.

CCA Vice President of Student Affairs Betsy Oudenhoven framed the intent of the “We Will Remember Memorial,” mentioning ongoing sorrow, anger and fear at circumstances alongside the encouragement she hoped would derive from the strength shown by individuals, family and community within their recoveries.

“We’ve seen some wonderful things come out of this hurtful event as far as showing what Aurora is,” Aurora Police Chief Dan Oates added.

Lasama Cross, Boik’s fiancée, provided one of the most poignant moments of the hour-long ceremony. Cross read a letter she said she placed at Boik’s grave that blended the past moments they spent together with the future she had envisioned for their union, now extinguished.

“He knew exactly how to make me laugh, feel important … to feel loved,” she said.

CCA Vice President of Instruction Xeturah Woodley discussed the individual histories that Blunk, Boik, Medek and Wingo spent at the college. “We will always feel a special connection to these wonderful young people,” she said.

That connection will be omnipresent at the CentreTech campus with the planting of four Snow Fountain Weeping Cherry Trees in honor of each of the deceased CCA students.

Scales noted that the nature of weeping isn’t always brought upon by sorrow but also in moments of triumph or celebrating the passing through of trying moments.

“Let’s not assign them to sorrow,” he said of the trees, which were adorned with lights as participants gathered in the dark holding candles and a lone bagpipe lent a somber soundtrack.

Rob Hatcher, vice president of the Student Government Association, which donated the trees, called the foliage a “celebration of … enduring memory” mixed with a presence that allows for “private and quiet” reflection.

CCA held a ceremony of remembrance earlier this summer on campus but wanted to provide a second memorial, since many students had yet to arrive on campus and now could partake in an impactful way.

Bells were chimed at the conclusion of the ceremony at the mention of Medek, Boik, Wingo and Blunk, followed by the refrain, “We will remember,” from the attendees.

“We’re a strong community,” Oates said. “We will recover from this.”

Todd Bergren’s life and accomplishments will be celebrated Dec. 5 at 3:30 p.m. in a dedication ceremony in the room that bears his name on Lowry campus.

The longtime Biology faculty died of pancreatic cancer on May 17, 2011 at age 48.

Members of his surviving family, including his wife Michelle and children Ben and Dana, are expected at the event.

“He was an amazing person,” said Martha Jackson-Carter, Science department chair, who started her CCA career with Bergren in the fall of 1993.

“The biggest thing is how well he treated everybody,” Bergren was instrumental in securing two large-scale grants at CCA and was integral in not only infusing Biotech education into state high schools but in training dozens of teachers in the implementation of the curriculum.

Bergren was cited for his outstanding contributions to the college and was a 2009 Colorado Bioscience Educator of the Year.

One of his proudest accomplishments was his key role in starting the Science Resource Center at the college with Jackson-Carter and Sheridan Samano, a former faculty member.

“It started in a tiny office and now it’s grown,” Jackson-Carter said. “We’ve gotten more space and money from various places and now it’s got models, microscopes, computers and reference books -- all kinds of stuff. And it’s a happening place. ... It’s everything we thought it would be.”

Jackson-Carter, though, not only recalled Bergren’s role in building the gathering spot but, throughout his CCA career, doing physical construction, which only underscored his resounding commitment to the college.

“He painted walls, put down flooring. He even once cut a hole in the wall for a door,” she recalled. “Nothing was beneath him that would make this place better. He totally believed in this place. There was nothing literally over the course of time he was here that he wasn’t willing to do.”

Todd Bergren ceremony set for Dec. 5

Plaque to be unveiled in room that bears name

Todd Bergren’s life and accomplishments will be celebrated Dec. 5 at 3:30 p.m. in a dedication ceremony in the room that bears his name on Lowry campus.

The longtime Biology faculty died of pancreatic cancer on May 17, 2011 at age 48.

Members of his surviving family, including his wife Michelle and children Ben and Dana, are expected at the event.

“He was an amazing person,” said Martha Jackson-Carter, Science department chair, who started her CCA career with Bergren in the fall of 1993.

“The biggest thing is how well he treated everybody,” Bergren was instrumental in securing two large-scale grants at CCA and was integral in not only infusing Biotech education into state high schools but in training dozens of teachers in the implementation of the curriculum.

Bergren was cited for his outstanding contributions to the college and was a 2009 Colorado Bioscience Educator of the Year.

One of his proudest accomplishments was his key role in starting the Science Resource Center at the college with Jackson-Carter and Sheridan Samano, a former faculty member.

“It started in a tiny office and now it’s grown,” Jackson-Carter said. “We’ve gotten more space and money from various places and now it’s got models, microscopes, computers and reference books -- all kinds of stuff. And it’s a happening place. ... It’s everything we thought it would be.”

Jackson-Carter, though, not only recalled Bergren’s role in building the gathering spot but, throughout his CCA career, doing physical construction, which only underscored his resounding commitment to the college.

“He painted walls, put down flooring. He even once cut a hole in the wall for a door,” she recalled. “Nothing was beneath him that would make this place better. He totally believed in this place. There was nothing literally over the course of time he was here that he wasn’t willing to do.”

Plaque to be unveiled in room that bears name

Todd Bergren’s life and accomplishments will be celebrated Dec. 5 at 3:30 p.m. in a dedication ceremony in the room that bears his name on Lowry campus.

The longtime Biology faculty died of pancreatic cancer on May 17, 2011 at age 48.

Members of his surviving family, including his wife Michelle and children Ben and Dana, are expected at the event.

“He was an amazing person,” said Martha Jackson-Carter, Science department chair, who started her CCA career with Bergren in the fall of 1993.

“The biggest thing is how well he treated everybody,” Bergren was instrumental in securing two large-scale grants at CCA and was integral in not only infusing Biotech education into state high schools but in training dozens of teachers in the implementation of the curriculum.

Bergren was cited for his outstanding contributions to the college and was a 2009 Colorado Bioscience Educator of the Year.

One of his proudest accomplishments was his key role in starting the Science Resource Center at the college with Jackson-Carter and Sheridan Samano, a former faculty member.

“It started in a tiny office and now it’s grown,” Jackson-Carter said. “We’ve gotten more space and money from various places and now it’s got models, microscopes, computers and reference books -- all kinds of stuff. And it’s a happening place. ... It’s everything we thought it would be.”

Jackson-Carter, though, not only recalled Bergren’s role in building the gathering spot but, throughout his CCA career, doing physical construction, which only underscored his resounding commitment to the college.

“He painted walls, put down flooring. He even once cut a hole in the wall for a door,” she recalled. “Nothing was beneath him that would make this place better. He totally believed in this place. There was nothing literally over the course of time he was here that he wasn’t willing to do.”
Good Questions with:

The Higher Learning Commission Executive Team

The scheduled visit by the Higher Learning Commission from April 15-17 is arguably the most important event on the 2013 calendar, given its role in determining reaccreditation for the Community College of Aurora. This will be the third reaccreditation visit by the HLC to CCA, having given initial approval in 1993 and reaffirming its position in 2003. The three-person Executive Team comprised of Chris Ward, executive director of Grants and Planning; Ruthanne Orihuela, chair for Performing Arts and Humanities; and Geoff Hunt, chair of Social Sciences, has been intimately involved in the formulation of a self-study document that presents evidence and reviews ongoing accomplishments. The trio recently gave an introduction to the HLC process, what it entails and why it matters so much.

1. What will the HLC be exploring?

The Higher Learning Commission is responsible for accrediting institutions so that they can offer federal financial aid. They do this by verifying the ability of institutions to continually offer quality programs and student support structures, while gauging financial stability and oversight, the integrity of operations and allegiance to a stated educational mission.

2. What are the five areas of reaccreditation that must be addressed? Mission; Integrity; Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support; Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement; and Resources and Planning. CCA has been researching and generating a report that speaks to each of these criteria since the establishment of a steering committee in Spring 2011. The final self-study document that's presented to the evaluation team in advance of their campus visit, along with the in-person consultation, will determine the college's eligibility for reaccreditation. The self-study serves as a snapshot of where CCA has been as an institution over the last 10 years; how it's grown and changed during that period; and also identifies strengths, challenges and opportunities moving forward.

3. What is the student, faculty and community role in the HLC visit?

Every person on the college's campuses and within the surrounding area has a role to play when the visit occurs. The site visit team will seek to learn whether what CCA states as its mission, and its fidelity to those goals, are widely agreed with, widely understood or whether there's scant awareness. For students, it's critical to know about the college they are attending and important to know their thoughts on the quality of the programs in which they're involved. For staff and faculty, commitment to student success will need to be demonstrated. For the community, its perspective on CCA's value also is critical. Gaining perspective can be done in part, by knowing the college's stated mission, which is providing lifelong learning opportunities, preparing the current and future workforce, and promoting excellence in learning and teaching to our diverse community.

4. What role will concurrent enrollment play in reaccreditation?

Concurrent enrollment currently accounts for more than 20 percent of the college's total enrollment. That has caught the eye of the HLC, which is interested in concurrent enrollment nationally. At CCA, it's of particular importance because it's affected the college's demographics and student body makeup to such a degree that the HLC has requested that the college submit not only reaccreditation information but something called a 'request for a change in student body.' That designation means that CCA's concurrent enrollment program will be closely evaluated. The end goal for the college is that it's viewed as maintaining quality, rigor and assessment in concurrent enrollment sections on par with other academic core areas. In short, if more than a fifth of the student body at CCA is receiving credit in high schools, the HLC wants to ensure that students are receiving college-level credit, student support services, etc.

5. What preparations already are underway and must still be completed prior to the HLC's mid-April visit?

The self-study is in its final draft phases and will be ready for editing in early January. The report is set to include: the college's history with HLC; CCA's response to each of the five criteria for reaccreditation; the change of student body request; and demonstration of compliance to federal regulations. Still to come are the communication and promotional activities surrounding the visit. A mock visit is planned for March. Several audits will take place to ensure that department documentation retains full accuracy. And an electronic resource room will be established to house evidence to be presented to HLC.
International students receive helping hands

Newly installed mentor program aids transition

Unconventional means were attempted to get Povel Loz to acclimate to American life after he transferred mid-year into a regular U.S. middle school about five years ago.

Her family was refugees from Senegal, West Africa. Povel came overseas speaking French and two African languages, Wolof and Fula. She was misunderstood frequently because of that barrier. Her grades were initially poor and she withdrew socially in her new homeland.

She even remembers waving away people in the cafeteria, wanting to endure silently in her own way. That notion wouldn't hold due to a persistent administrator.

“The principal started shoving people at me, doing it every single day until I decided to give in,” she recalled.

It was a means to an end to spur communication and unity, but sort of organized chaos. Yet Ba’s story isn’t unusual for many foreign students coming to America and initially finding few common bonds.

Mix that predicament with a sense of homesickness and loneliness and it can be a recipe for isolation.

It was this type of backstory that prompted a change at Community College of Aurora’s two diverse campuses, beginning this past summer.

International ESL academic advisor Emelda Jones had long ago come to the realization that international students coming to CCA needed some kind of support system through her study of four-year institutions.

The idea was hatched that another foreign-born student already entrenched at the college would help serve as mentor. Tier two of the plan would also include an American student. Jones sought someone young enough to understand the system and CCA’s culture, with top-tier grades behind the social component. That put Ascent students immediately on the radar, if they were willing, to aid F1 visa students specifically.

A summer meeting cemented the idea.

There are now currently 18 Ascent students; 20 international students being mentored, and 12 international student mentors involved in the initiative.

Ba, who has attended CCA since her junior year at Rangeview H.S., has been heavily involved within the Ascent contingent mentoring international students and understands better than most the concept behind the pairings.

“I wish they had it when I came to the U.S.,” Ba said. “It’s really good for them. It will speed up the time for them to start trusting people. The hardest part, more than language, is that they feel they’re being made fun of because they don’t speak the language.”

The culture piece also is important. “It’s hard for them to make friends if they don’t get used to the culture. Many try to stay with their own culture, since they don’t have friends. But it’s important for them to get used to it so they don’t feel so lonely.

They won’t always be there.”

Attempts are made to pair foreign students up by country or home language, if possible. Most F1 visa students are typically between 19 and 26 and can’t work. The initial thought was to pair them with someone in that age range. But Jones felt the personalities of the Ascent students would mesh better.

“These are students with high GPAs and they’re involved in 15 credits and have fulfilled their high school requirements. So those were the main reasons: age and the fact that they’re not only free-spirited but resourceful as well. If they don’t know the answers, they will definitely go out and get the answers for you.”

All of the mentees have to possess some proficiency with English because CCA’s ESL program doesn’t offer the most basic level. All are beyond at least the community ESL level in terms of language skills.

“It’s all been positive,” Jones said.

“On a regular basis, the international students come to me and they’re so happy they have two mentors – the Ascent student and the international student, as well. Some of them have asked if they can get another Ascent student because they get so attached to that one person and they want another person to befriend.”

As the program has evolved, the English as a Second Language population at the college also has become involved in the program as a means to practice their English.

“I’ve been overseas so I know that it’s nice to have someone who’s already been there or someone who’s native,” said adviser Wendy Jenkins, who works hand-in-hand with Jones on the project, using her experiences in peer mentoring with new CCA faculty and working within Academic Enrichment as the springboard.

“Plus, I’ve been a new student in a lot of places and the more friends and the more contact you have, the more likely you are to be successful,” Jenkins added.

Some of the countries represented by CCA international students involved in the program emanate from Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, India, South Africa, Ivory Coast, France, Ethiopia, Uzbekistan and Swaziland.

Theo Brun came to CCA from Lyon, France about two years ago. He temporarily moved to Aurora to live with an American family and improve his English-speaking abilities at the college level.

Brun’s international mentor, Jesus Loza, from Lima, Peru, has been there to help guide him on some of the ancillary issues that many around campus take for granted.

“It was really helpful,” Brun said. “He is a good friend. I had trouble. I needed to find an apartment or place to live, so I asked him. Every time I have a problem or stuff like that, I ask. He knows the places, the people, everything, better than me here.”

Loza gave Brun his cellphone number in case of emergencies and introduced him to members of the International Student Association.

“It took me about one year to get introduced to these activities,” said Loza, who’s in his fourth semester at CCA. “I know when you come to this country and you don’t have too (many) people to talk or socialize (with) you need these free activities. At first, we did college activities then we looked for activities outside of college.”

The two have gone to the movies and Estes Park, among those non-CCA excursions.

There are early talks about potentially rolling the Business population that has a high international component and/or Trio students into the program in the future.

Jones and Jenkins may soon present their initial successes with the initiative at a meeting of department chairs.

“It’s the start of something big,” Jones said.
Information bank

Students Seth Cardin and Jennifer Bird present their Honors Projects’ Outcomes: Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Brockden Brown -- A Discussion of American Gothic Literature. The event is part of the American Literature Lecture Series and will be held Dec. 6 from 12:30-1:45 p.m. at the CentreTech Fine Arts Forum.

It’s free and open to the public. For more information: Professor Rachel Blue Ankney at rachel.ankney@ccaurora.edu or 303.340.7598.

Donations of toys or other gifts are being requested for a “Giving Tree,” which is designed to spread holiday cheer to Community College of Aurora families in need. Donations are being accepted at the West Quad Lobby at Lowry and the Student Success Center (S101) at CentreTech through Dec. 14. To receive a gift, please come to these same locations specifying a desired item or clothing request. The “Giving Tree” event is sponsored by the CCA Student Government Association. For additional information, please contact 303-340-7525.

The local community, CCA students, staff and faculty are invited to come witness the works of CFS/CCA film students’ finished products, which will be evaluated and awarded on merit.

This year’s Fall 2012 Student Show will be held Dec. 12 at 7:30 p.m. at the Harkins Theatre at Northfield (8300 E. Northfield Blvd., Denver, 80238).

Attendees may vote for their favorite film at the event and attend the after party at La Sandia, located just a short walk from the theater. This event is designed to celebrate student achievement as well as provide a socializing opportunity for CCA students.

The Colorado Film School holds semi-annual student shows at a local theatre: one in Fall and one in Spring. This event is free and open to the public. Doors open at 7 p.m.

The Colorado Legislature, per the request of Senator Nancy Spence, presented a commendation to 92-year old CCA student Graham M. Witherspoon on Nov. 1 at the state Capitol.

Witherspoon was cited for his Naval service from Jan. 1942 until April 1959 as well as his volunteer work at the Colorado Mental Health Institute at Fort Logan, where he advocated for patients, including his son.

Daniel Sandoval, Director of the Trio Student Support Services program, left CCA to pursue a position with Colorado Mesa University, Dean of Student Success Elena Sandoval-Lucero announced.

Sandoval will be the Director of Diversity, Advocacy and Health in this newly created role, which entails oversight of all diversity initiatives on campus and management of mental health services and the student health clinic.

CCA nursing students played a part Nov. 14 at the Capitol, providing free spirometry testing in conjunction with National COPD Awareness Month.

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease is the third leading cause of death in the United States and is a cause of serious long-term disability. More than 12 million people are diagnosed with COPD; another 12 million may have the disease and are unaware.

Larry Steele, an adjunct History instructor, was one of the nine Coloradans in the Electoral College for the recently completed Presidential election. Each party elected potential Electors for the December Electoral College Vote. A Nov. 6 vote confirmed the actual Electors.

Tamra Schmitt is returning to a faculty role in the School of Business after three years as department chair, Dean of Instruction Victor Vialpando announced. Mike Manaton, associate chair, will assume the lead role, following a tradition of rotating leadership in the academic community.

Emilija Cusak has joined CCA as Senior Accountant, it was announced Nov. 27. Cusak has worked as a CPA in both public and private industries and in addition to her accounting background holds a Law degree.

Counseling services have centralized at CentreTech during the month of November.

Slots are available in Room A106D in the Administration Building five days a week, led by Sarah Gallegos and Rosanne Surine. For appointments, or student referrals, call Javon Brane at 303-360-4932.

CCA student Eric Withrow finished in first place statewide in Round 1 of the United States/Canada Cisco NetRiders post-secondary competition.

Withrow was one of five students from Colorado to advance, joining four others from Colorado Mesa University/Western Colorado Community College. Round 2 of the competition involved an exam slated withrow was one of five students from Colorado to advance, joining four others from Colorado Mesa University/Western Colorado Community College. Round 2 of the competition involved an exam slated for Nov. 30. The third round finale is scheduled to take place at Cisco’s world headquarters in San Jose, Calif. That trip is all expenses paid.

“Process,” the latest student art exhibit at the Donna Moravec Gallery at Lowry, kick-started with a reception on Nov. 30.

The show will highlight the creative process and run through Dec. 11. Regular hours for the gallery are Monday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Contact 303-640-7335 for further details.

---

H.S. kids get STEM training at Lowry campus.

Students from William Smith High School received hands-on training in STEM related curriculum Nov. 16 at Lowry as part of the Xcel Energy camp.

“I think some of the students are looking at how this can really take off,” counselor Lisa Gonzales said.

The CCA presentation was two-tiered.

The 25 participants were schooled in “Probability and Gambling” by Shari Holder, math faculty. The exercise was designed to learn about how odds of winning are actually calculated by mathematical equations. And, through the prism of the Colorado Lotto, the students could get a true feel about the truly long odds of winning.

“I think they put it in perspective and I think a few of them were going to go home and tell their parents the chances of them actually winning,” Gonzales said.

Jennifer Harrell and Tara Croom-Sanchez of the Science Department then took the Williams Smith H.S. contingent through a DNA extraction experiment. Students separated the DNA molecule from other substances in a cell and discovered how a disease is transmitted from one person to another in a simulated fashion.

“We come from an expeditionary learning school, where they do a lot of hands-on experiments. They probably haven’t had any Chemistry yet, and so having the exposure, being in a college level classroom and having those thoughts and bringing it their attention is really helpful,” Gonzales added.

Science faculty Jennifer Harrell helps William Smith H.S. students with their DNA experiment Nov. 16 at Lowry campus.
Clockwise from top: The Fall 2012 inductees into Phi Theta Kappa are honored at the CentreTech Rotunda; student Patricia Combs poses at Regis University, where she was honored as a scholarship recipient. Combs will transfer to Regis’ College for Professional Studies this spring; Communication faculty Vicki Graham counsels students during the CCA Education Fair; Director of Advising (and retired Chief Master Sgt.) Rene Simard and retired Lt. Col. George Peck help dedicate the Lowry Veterans Wall of Honor; Bobby A. Browning, Colorado State University assistant director of admissions, doles out advice to CCA student Blessed Otabil during the statewide Transfer Fair.