



Director of Academic Assessment

Progress on HLC Action Items January 2019

Review

In June of 2018 Minot State University (MSU) received an action letter from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) that reaffirmed the institution's accreditation, but prescribed interim monitoring. The substance of this monitoring is a set of rationales and requests for evidence pertaining to specific accreditation criterion, which, per HLC's determination, MSU is at present deficiently substantiating. These requests can be grouped into several different categories, but it is best to think of them as a set of interlinking projects and processes that demand both specific and institutional responses. Much thought, discussion, and planning have been invested in action steps. It is by design that this burgeoning foundation be substantiated and matured in the coming months and years. The specifics of preoccupation, and the subsequent action steps, are detailed below.

Progress

Progress is divided into each Core Component evidence request. One should not construe this division as discrete, as many of these evidence requests and the action items overlap in both subtle and significant ways. A conclusion and summation will follow this breakdown and attempt to coalesce each piece into the whole.

Regarding **Core Component 2.A**, HLC asked for "*evidence that the institution is able to produce all requested documentation in an accessible, complete, and organized manner when requested.*" To this request several projects that aim to unify, integrate, and make more transparent and consistent the cataloging and documentation of information, process, and policy are advancing. Many internal stakeholders have received a request for a past year's report, data set, policy document, or been asked to create or refine a policy or process. These edits and refinements are a necessary part of this early stage of progress, and such requests will continue as MSU moves forward. The central characteristic of this request is MSU's capacity to produce intentional documentation when requested by internal and external stakeholders.

Regarding **Core Component 3.A**, HLC asked for several complimentary pieces of evidence. Namely, they requested:

- *Evidence that the institution has developed, implemented, and is monitoring a plan to assure that course level-outcomes are being met for all programs across all modalities;*

To this request the faculty are working to refine their assessment procedures. Through numerous conversations and planning sessions, deliberate and focused steps are actively being carried out, which include:

1. Creation and implementation of an assessment liaison program aimed at strategically engaging additional faculty in the assessment process and cycle;



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2. Clarification of student learning goals and outcomes, both at the program and course level;
 3. A simultaneous effort to organize, unify, and make more transparent student learning goal(s) and outcome(s);
 4. A basic or introductory set of MSU assessment resources is being developed, refined, and curated; and
 5. Several adjustments to the assessment reporting structure are in place and/or are being evaluated
- *Evidence that the institution has developed and implemented policies and processes to ensure that the work, contact hours, and assessment practices for all courses taught in a compressed format are equivalent to their non-compressed counterparts;*
 - *Copies of all syllabi for any and all courses offered through multiple modes of delivery, demonstrating that the scope and specified learning outcomes and activities for the courses are equivalent across modalities;*
 - *Evidence that the institution has created and implemented a review process and accountability system to ensure that all syllabi comply with the expectations regarding equivalency across modality and format; and*
 - *Evidence that the institution has continued the suspension of scheduling two- week compressed courses until the aforementioned policies and processes have been fully implemented.*

To these requests a policy and procedure is in place that ensures compressed course syllabi are reviewed, compared, and evaluated for consistency, currency, equivalence before the course begins, and then subsequently cataloged for comparison, when needed. This policy and procedure engages the Academic Assessment Committee, the VPAA, department/division chairs, and faculty and staff. As the process evolves, refinements will be made to expedite the practice and clarify the policy. In addition, the University Chairs Council authored minimum requirements for all MSU syllabi. Faculty Senate approved these requirements on February 15, 2018. Every semester an audit of all MSU syllabi is conducted by departments/divisions to verify required information is included. All syllabi and audit results are posted in SharePoint.

Regarding **Core Component 4.B**, several important developments and decisions have processed through committee, have been presented to relevant stakeholders, and are currently working through procedural steps.

- *A detailed assessment plan that includes learning outcomes and standardized assessment practices in co-curricular programming and activities*

Unlike many of the other elements to be addressed, co-curricular is a new task. To this end several important steps have been accomplished.

1. A committee, comprised of both faculty and staff, was formed in September.



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2. The co-curricular committee developed a working definition of co-curricular learning: *“Learning activities that take place outside the classroom that complement the learning that takes place inside the classroom, and are not graded.”*
 3. In Phase One of the development, the committee worked through several types of theoretical and practical foundations for co-curricular. These foundations were nuanced but all represent A) co-curricular programs suited to MSU’s mission and contribute to the educational experience of MSU students, and B) promote assessment of student learning.
 4. Pilot offices are being identified, as are basic co-curricular activities, assessment measures, and assessment procedures.
- *The designation and establishment of a procedure in which all assessment data is reviewed, stored, and made available to constituent groups.*

To this request both refinement and clarification of process, procedure, and policy have been planned, executed, and are in process. Additionally, work continues on clarification, organization, and cataloging. The following tasks and processes are active:

1. An audit of the past two cycles of academic assessment reporting;
2. A brief, but fundamental review of 2017-18 academic assessment reports is finished;
3. An academic assessment timeline is in development; and
4. Assessment conversations, meetings, and an introductory presentation on assessment basics was completed for specific administrative units (student affairs directors).

Finally, **Core Component 5.C**, which entails a more comprehensive evidence request, has and is being considered and addressed by multiple institutional governance stakeholders. The important elements in evidencing this component are intentionality and institutional response. No one office, or even division, can accomplish the tasks or produce the evidence necessary to robustly answer HLC’s request. The following two evidence requests are pointed:

- *Documentation of two complete cycles of planning that provides clear evidence that the institution consistently and systematically links its planning, assessment of student learning, and budget prioritization processes*
- *Evidence that the institution has taken steps to establish an appropriate policy to assure that the process of planning is systemic and sustainable beyond current personnel*

To answer these requests, and, more importantly, to substantively embody their principle idea, institutional effectiveness, planning, process maturation, and projects are moving forward. These include:

1. Updates and refinements of the MSU Strategic Plan;
2. Two forums were held to present and discuss updates and refinements to MSU Strategic Plan;



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3. MSU's annual budget process and timeline has been developed and updated by faculty, staff, and administration, presented to and supported by President Shirley, President's Staff, Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, and the Academic Assessment Committee;
4. A discussion and organization of what constitutes "clear evidence" of 5.C is in process; and
5. A Strategic Planning Retreat is planned for Spring 2019.

Summary and Conclusion

Six months have passed since the HLC Board of Trustees assigned interim monitoring and requested these pointed evidence requests. In that time a methodical process of gathering data began, a diversity of conversations and strategy sessions were held, and projects and pathways were developed and started. Much clarity has been gained with profitable evidence produced due to the effort and energy expended.

Nonetheless, progress must continue. It must continue up to and past the June 2020 deadline. Unless MSU desires to repeat this process, several fundamental ideas must become culturally imbedded. First, assessment, and all its attached components, is not a passing fad. Consequently, it is prudent to continue the steady and continuous pace of student learning improvement that is central to assessment. Second, while improvement is at the heart of assessment and institutional effectiveness, maintenance is also central to both. Deterioration is a force both natural and human systems must confront and discourage. To do so will require focused attention on proactive solutions that ameliorate change, instead of reactive solutions that placate change. Third, accreditation compliance must not be understood as bureaucratic "hoop jumping," but rather as the minimum set of standards that MSU not only evidences but exceeds in exemplary ways.

Finally, in daily working through the elements of HLC accreditation and compliance with professionals from across MSU, encouraging trends abound. The expertise, talent, drive, and desire to remedy this issue, and to do so in a way that sets a new and certain tone, is evident. To this end, if you have not already joined in with your colleagues please consider what you might contribute to our collective effort. It is and will be worth the investment.