



Progress Report to the
Middle States Commission on Higher Education

From

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
University Park, PA 16802

Dr. Rodney A. Erickson, President

Dr. Blannie E. Bowen, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
Accreditation Liaison Officer

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Subject of the Follow-Up Report:

“At its session on November 18, 2010, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education acted to accept the Periodic Review Report and to reaffirm accreditation. To request a progress report due by April 1, 2012 documenting evidence of further progress in: (1) the establishment of learning goals at the program level in all programs; and (2) the use of appropriate assessment of the attainment of learning goals at the program level, including use of direct measures of the assessment of student learning and evidence that assessment results are used to improve teaching and learning (Standard 14).”

PRR Submitted:
May 26, 2010

INTRODUCTION

This report is presented in response to the request from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, as noted in its November 18, 2010 session and documented via letter dated November 19, 2010:

To accept the Periodic Review Report and to reaffirm accreditation. To request a progress report due by April 1, 2012 documenting evidence of further progress in: (1) the establishment of learning goals at the program level in all programs; and (2) the use of appropriate assessment of the attainment of learning goals at the program level, including use of direct measures of the assessment of student learning and evidence that assessment results are used to improve teaching and learning (Standard 14).

In 1863, Penn State was designated as the state's land-grant institution, created with the three-part mission of teaching, research, and public service. Penn State is one of four universities in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that is considered "state-related." While not state-owned or state-operated, Penn State, along with the University of Pittsburgh, Temple University, and Lincoln University, receives a state appropriation. Penn State is comprised of 24 campuses throughout the Commonwealth, with the largest campus located at University Park. This multi-campus structure provides accessibility to higher education for students throughout the state.

While the foundations of Penn State are solidly based on the traditions, history, and accomplishments of our University community, recent events brought the University unprecedented public scrutiny. While the events that provoked the scrutiny are sad and deeply disturbing, the community is responding. As distressing as this is and will continue to be, there is also a clear resolve among students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of the University to move forward and continue our positive efforts to teach, learn, and conduct research.

On November 11, 2011, Middle States requested that Penn State provide an informational report "addressing the recent developments and/or plans to ensure the University's ongoing compliance with the Commission's Requirements of Affiliation and with Standard 6, Integrity" and to be kept informed on the status and results of various investigations. This request provided an opportunity for reflective assessment of our core mission, and we appreciate the scope and intent of the request even though the current situation did not originate on the academic side of the institution. Penn State provided that informational report on December 21, 2011. On February 7, 2012, Penn State provided Middle States with an update on ongoing investigations, audits, and inquiries specific to recent events, including the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office criminal investigation, the independent investigation commissioned by the Board of Trustees task force, the U.S. Department of Education Clery Act Review, and an inquiry from the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

On November 9, 2011, Rodney A. Erickson assumed the responsibilities of Penn State's 17th president. While assuming this leadership under unprecedented circumstances, President Erickson quickly established a tone for the Penn State community that focused on rebuilding trust and confidence. Prior to his presidency, he served as Executive Vice President and Provost,

a position he held since 1999. Also, on November 15, 2011, Robert N. Pangborn was named Interim Executive Vice President and Provost. From 2006 until the time of this appointment, he served as Penn State's Vice President and Dean for Undergraduate Education.

On January 20, 2012, Karen Peetz was elected chair of Penn State's Board of Trustees, replacing Steve Garban, and Keith Masser was elected vice chair, replacing John Surma.

Another leadership change occurred on February 6, 2012, when David J. Gray, former chief financial and administrative officer at the University of Massachusetts, assumed the position of Senior Vice President for Finance and Business/Treasurer.

Penn State is currently in the midst of a national search to identify the University's next Vice President and General Counsel. The search committee includes representatives from a wide array of University functions, as well as two representatives from the University's Board of Trustees.

When Penn State embraced the opportunity to "tell our story" in our 2010 PRR, it was with great pride. We appreciate Middle State's request for this Progress Report, as it allowed us to reflect on those continued efforts and provide additional information to celebrate our success and affirm our opportunities for further refinement and improvement.

PROGRESS TO DATE AND CURRENT STATUS

The June 2010 PRR highlighted many of the activities and changes that have been undertaken in the area of developing a more comprehensive and sustained assessment process and included results demonstrating that the University and our students are achieving the stated goals. This Progress Report provides more detailed supporting documentation to address the two lines of inquiry specific for the Progress Report.

The establishment of learning goals at the program level in all programs.

I. Baccalaureate Programs

In April 2010, the Assessment Coordinating Committee of the Administrative Council of Undergraduate Education (<http://www.assess.psu.edu/AssessmentCoordinatingCommittee/>) was formed to build upon the progress made by the Coordinating Committee on University Assessment, including ongoing commitment to *The Pennsylvania State University Assessment Plan for Student Learning*. This Assessment Coordinating Committee is charged with: 1) monitoring progress on the University's Assessment Plan, 2) developing milestones and timelines for continued progress on learning assessment, 3) identifying and recommending research, analysis or assessments that need to be implemented or coordinated centrally, and 4) continuing to update resources and best practices to be made available to the University community. The Committee's first action was to request evidence of learning outcomes from all four-year programs, due May 2011, including identification of one learning objective with a plan for gathering evidence of achievement, to be reported by May 2012.

In July and August of 2011, the Assessment Coordinating Committee reviewed approximately 150 assessment plans from four-year programs at all Penn State locations. The following narrative and accompanying appendices focus on many of those efforts and serve as compelling examples of the progress we have made. Appendix A provides an inventory of all programs reviewed as of the writing of this report, including several that are shared or offered at several of our campus locations. The College of Agricultural Sciences has been given a one-year extension for submission on its plans; the College of Arts and Architecture, Smeal College of Business, College of Engineering, School of Nursing, and nine campuses of the University College, are either in process or are currently under review. The University Park colleges in the aforementioned sentence contain programs that are predominantly accredited programs; therefore, the Committee has focused its reviews on programs not accustomed to such standards or expectations.

For each program noted in Appendix A, at least two members of the Assessment Coordinating Committee reviewed each plan; therefore, in most cases there are two notations for Measure as well as Rank to take into account each individual reviewer's feedback. A rating of 1 indicates that the plan is accepted without need for revision; a rating of 2 indicates that there is room for improvement and enhancement; and, a rating of 3 indicates that the plan needs revision before data collection may commence. The "Unedited Comments from Reviewers" provide samples of the type of comments specific to the overall quality of individual submissions. This feedback

was then made part of a more detailed narrative included in a comprehensive assessment report provided to each college or campus (examples noted later in this report as Appendix B and C). When only one Measure and Rank are provided, the second reviewer was the chair of the Assessment Coordinating Committee who, in addition to compiling and gathering information from all reviewers, was also the prime author of each assessment report.

With the information in Appendix A as a context, Appendix B and C provide examples of specific assessment reports from one of twelve colleges at University Park (Appendix B, the Eberly College of Science), and one Commonwealth Campus (Appendix C, Penn State Brandywine). These two examples provide a more granular perspective on the reporting and review process: they include departmental plans for each baccalaureate program, plus the Assessment Coordinating Committee's review of the plans. As evidence of positive change, the revised and resubmitted plans for Science and Premedicine within the Eberly College of Science are provided at the end of the appendix, which clearly indicate an improved focus on student learning rather than advising. The Penn State Brandywine submission provides a realistic view of the complexities of the Penn State's geographically-dispersed structure; while this campus provides some very good assessment plans, an improvement opportunity exists in establishing a better coordinated effort with other campuses for programs offered at multiple locations. These two unit examples show that the University is taking an open, honest, and forward-thinking approach to not only tracking and monitoring assessment plans, but also providing evaluative feedback and structure.

To supplement the above information, Appendix D and E provide two samples of exemplar submissions of Learning Outcomes Assessment Plans which include clear and measurable learning objectives that are based on the student perspective, with accompanying methods of collecting direct evidence of student learning. In the Business program at Penn State Altoona (Appendix D), clearly-stated learning objectives are detailed with linkages made to appropriate assessment tools that provide a direct measure of achievement. In the submission from the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures (Appendix E), a review of student essays in a culminating course is used to evaluate the extent to which specifically-required program elements have been attained. A clear strength of this plan includes assessment of student performance by blind reviewers and inclusion of a scoring guide or rubric. Additional exemplar plans can be found at <http://www.assess.psu.edu/exampleplans>.

II. General Education

Integration of learning goals continues through other specific and strategic efforts as well. The Critical Thinking Aptitude Test (CAT) was developed by researchers at Tennessee Tech University, with funding from the National Science Foundation, to evaluate critical thinking skills. Penn State is participating in a pilot phase of this interdisciplinary tool in Spring 2012 that will offer a direct measure of critical thinking skills with the results assisting in our assessment of student learning in general education as well as in all aspects of the undergraduate experience. The CAT pilot project is designed to evaluate differences between lower- and upper-division students in their critical thinking skills, with 200 tests being administered. In addition, 50 tests

will be administered in a lower-division course, Engineering Design 100, in order to evaluate growth in students' critical thinking skills over the course of the semester.

III. Next Steps

The Assessment Coordinating Committee has identified several steps to be taken over the next several years. Most critically, colleges and campuses are encouraged to continue reflection on their assessment plans and results and establish appropriate next steps. The ultimate goal of the committee's work is to embed the process of learning outcomes assessment within the faculty culture of each unit of the university. Specific steps are outlined below, and will be monitored and facilitated by the committee.

At an institution as large and geographically complex as Penn State, consistency will be an ongoing focus. Toward that end, a working group of Associate Deans from the non-University Park campuses has committed to working together and striving for increased consistency in plans across the University. This ongoing dialogue and effort will be assistive to the Assessment Coordinating Committee.

For each program reviewed with a 3 rating (as noted in Appendix A), a resubmission plan is expected for Committee review by May 2012. All other programs will report the results of the initial year of data collection, and will indicate specific programmatic changes that are made on the basis of this process. This information will be collected and evaluated by the Committee.

Individual colleges and campuses are being encouraged to place information on departmental and programmatic websites to increase student awareness of expectations and outcomes. An example of this effort to be more explicit with students about expectations can be seen in the Eberly College of Science, with a goal set developed for all majors within the College at <http://science.psu.edu/undergraduate-students/goals-for-students-majoring-in-the-eberly-college-of-science>.

With a rich collection of learning outcomes assessment data now obtained from a diverse collection of programs, a next step toward institutional integration and openness will be establishing a mechanism for access and retrieval. Under the leadership of the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, the Program Assessment Plan Repository will provide a platform to upload and store assessment documents. Phase 1 of this project (with a target date of May 1, 2012) will include server configuration, storage functionality, and file upload and retrieval by members of the Assessment Coordinating Committee and academic administrators responsible for oversight of assessment. Additionally, functionality for reviewers and users will then be included in subsequent phases of implementation.

Penn State's history of comprehensive strategic planning continues to focus on interconnections between our mission, goals and objectives. Institutional assessment and evaluation are critical processes that facilitate this interaction. As we prepare for the next strategic planning cycle, the next round of unit-level (i.e., college and campus) strategic planning will begin in 2013-14 and will likely run through 2018-19. The executive vice president and provost and his staff have

already begun structuring the framework for those unit plans; while details will certainly evolve in the coming months, the unit planning guidelines will include a request similar to the following, which is in draft form:

For academic units: A discussion of plans, progress, and initiatives in learning outcomes assessment. Please discuss your unit's program assessment process and actions (such as curricular change based on findings), especially for graduate and undergraduate programs not subject to national accreditation reviews. For undergraduate programs, the information should connect with the ongoing student outcomes assessment and improvement work being carried out in conjunction with the Assessment Coordination Committee of the Administrative Council on Undergraduate Education.

This important step will help embed the culture of program assessment further at the program level, as it will clearly be part of the academic mission and responsibility of the departments and colleges, albeit with support from upper administration.

The use of appropriate assessment of the attainment of learning goals at the program level, including use of direct measures of the assessment of student learning and evidence that assessment results are used to improve teaching and learning (Standard 14).

Penn State emphasizes the need for each academic program to collect both direct and indirect evidence of students' learning. We continue to collect information about this evidence from the academic units as part of the annual reporting on assessment progress. The second annual iteration is due May 2012.

We have focused considerable attention on the need to collect a variety of evidence, and some academic programs have made significant progress. As expected, programs are at varying states and stages in the assessment process. The four examples below illustrate that these efforts are beginning to bear fruit.

1. The Geosciences BS program in the College of Earth and Mineral Sciences gathered direct evidence of students' writing abilities and communication skills from Field Camp reports. Field Camp is a capstone course in which students are expected to integrate core content, demonstrate their ability to observe and record scientific data, and solve geologic problems. The Field Camp reports showed that students' writing abilities were highly variable. As a result, the teaching and the learning have been impacted. Faculty members realized that the purpose and expectations of the Field Camp reports needed to be clarified and made explicit to students. Students have a better understanding of the kind of writing the reports should demonstrate.
2. Panels of professional writers provide external reviews of student projects in order to assess student achievement of learning outcomes in the Advertising and Public Relations program of the College of Communications. This direct assessment of students' work revealed that reviewers were not satisfied with the quality of students' writing. This provided evidence to support what was purely anecdotal among the faculty and indicated that the program had to address it with students and faculty. Not only did standards have

to improve, students needed to have an opportunity to develop the grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word usage skills required of journalists. Even students able to write effectively for essay exams or term papers might not have the skills needed by journalists or public relations specialists. Rather than adding to an already full curriculum, faculty developed a required 1-credit course, Basic News Writing Skills. Faculty teaching upper level courses reported improvements almost immediately. The course now enrolls students from other Communications departments and other colleges, and is being offered at other Penn State campuses.

3. Another curricular change based on direct assessment comes from the internship program at Penn State Beaver in Communications Arts and Sciences. Intern evaluations provided by supervisors at local newspapers indicated that students lacked a critical skill needed by journalists—the ability to serve as their own photographers. The Communications faculty at Beaver is small, making offering a photojournalism course impractical. However, the existing curriculum does include courses where such skills can be addressed more thoroughly, including the internship course, Reporting Methods, which is designed to help students develop skills that meet local, regional, and county reporting needs.
4. While the above examples emphasize direct measures, Penn State faculty have also used indirect evidence of student learning to create improvements in teaching and learning. At Penn State Schuylkill, a survey of graduates from the Psychology program revealed that they wished they had taken advantage of the opportunity to present class projects in the Student Research and Scholarship Conference. These graduates belatedly recognized the value of such presentations and recognized that, as undergraduates, they lacked sufficient motivation to voluntarily take part in the research conference. The Psychology faculty responded by integrating presentations into many of their upper-division courses as a required and graded projects. The projects were specifically designed to produce results that would meet the conference requirements, but also could be adapted to be submitted by individual students or teams.

CONCLUSION

Penn State's progress in the area of developing a comprehensive and sustained assessment process have been firmly institutionalized and we continue to make strides.

The establishment of learning goals at the program level is illustrated by the documentation provided in the supporting appendices in this report and when the final submissions and reviews of the colleges and campuses noted in the report still are finalized, the full complement of learning goals at the program levels will have been completed for all programs.

The use of appropriate assessment of attainment of learning goals, including use of direct measures and evidence that results are employed to improve teaching and learning is a continued emphasis with some academic programs having made substantial progress. Programs are at various stages in this effort, and this report has provided several examples of improved teaching and learning efforts.

APPENDICES OF SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

APPENDIX A: PLAN REVIEWS

APPENDIX B: SUBMISSIONS AND REVIEW REPORT – EBERLY COLLEGE OF SCIENCE

APPENDIX C: SUBMISSIONS AND REVIEW REPORT – PENN STATE BRANDYWINE

APPENDIX D: EXEMPLAR PLAN EXAMPLE – PENN STATE ALTOONA, BUSINESS

APPENDIX E: EXAMPLAR PLAN EXAMPLE – GERMANIC AND SLAVIC LANGUAGES