

To: Frank Einhellig, Provost, Missouri State University
Cc: Keri Franklin, Director of Assessment, Missouri State University
From: Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise
RE: Review of the Missouri State University Office of Assessment
Date: 1/7/2019

We visited Missouri State University (MSU) on August 28-30, 2018 to conduct an external review of MSU's Office of Assessment. During our visit we met with following groups or individuals:

1. The staff of the Office of Assessment
2. Department chairs who'd recently completed their departmental reviews
3. A small group of graduate and undergraduate students
4. Provost Frank Einhellig
5. The HLC Advisory Committee
6. The Academic Leadership Council
7. Recent recipients of assessment grants
8. The Council on General Education and Intercollegiate Programs (CGEIP)
9. A group of General Education Coordinators
10. The President's Chief of Staff, Ryan DeBoef
11. The Student Affairs Council
12. The Faculty Senate Executive Committee
13. A group of people who are thinking about data infrastructure at MSU
14. The Assessment Council
15. Career Center Director, Kelly Rapp

Overall, we found that the Office of Assessment is doing exemplary work supporting and sharpening the efforts of faculty and staff to use evidence to improve student learning. The consultative approach employed by Keri Franklin and her colleagues, Julia Cottrell and Mark Woolsey, is both effective and a model that assessment offices at other institutions should follow. It avoids the widespread assessment error of focusing on the bureaucratic processes of developing data collection and report-writing routines, and focuses instead on forming supportive and collegial relationships with faculty and staff and working within those relationships to help those colleagues use evidence to improve student learning.

In the rest of the memo below, we review in more detail what we took away from our visit to Missouri State University.

Context for our report

We first visited MSU five years ago, shortly after Keri Franklin's appointment as the Director of Assessment. Prior to Keri's appointment, MSU used standardized assessment templates to have departments, programs, and colleges summarize their assessment efforts. As it often does, this standardized approach promoted a "just fill out the form" compliance mentality that wasn't benefitting student learning or faculty/staff professional development. We also noted "an atmosphere of distrust and fear" among faculty and staff that assessment findings might be used to cut programs or fire people.

We found no evidence that administrators intended to use assessment findings for such actions. Indeed, in our conversations with Provost Frank Einhellig, we were impressed with his focus on using assessment for improvement of student learning and faculty and staff skills. It's rare to hear a provost say, "I want reflection, not pro forma reports." Nonetheless, the perception that assessment could be used as a cudgel and the one-size-fits-all

form fed fears that assessment was potentially dangerous make-work, not a genuine effort to improve the university's impact on students.

To counter this atmosphere, and to take advantage of the respect for Keri that people expressed during our visit, we recommended that MSU's Office of Assessment should take a consultative, face-to-face approach to working with faculty and staff on assessment. We also suggested that, as a goal, the "...Office of Assessment should be viewed as a place for honest conversations about things that are working—as well as things that are not working—in courses, programs, and departments, and as resource for individuals and units on campus that seek to improve their educational impact.”

In the five years since our visit, we have given similar advice in our work with assessment offices at institutions across the country. Assessment is, ultimately, about using evidence to support professional development in the service of improving student learning. Everything else, from filling out departmental reports to meeting regional accreditation requirements, is an epiphenomenon of that aim. Five years later, we've learned that no one we've worked with has fulfilled the promise of that advice as fully as Keri Franklin and her two colleagues in MSU's Office of Assessment.

Strengths of the work of the Office of Assessment

Across our conversations in our August 2018 visit, we heard praise and respect for the support, collegiality, good intentions, and impact of the MSU Office of Assessment. Specifically, five aspects of the Office of Assessment's work emerged in our conversations:

1. The Office of Assessment's consultative approach

In our experience, when faculty and staff think about assessment, they tend to think about the mechanics of assessment - developing learning outcomes, measuring those outcomes, and writing reports. At many institutions, assessment is something people do because someone up the bureaucratic food chain has asked them to do it. As a result, many faculty and staff see assessment as an exercise that takes time away from their efforts to mold their courses and programs to improve student learning. Sadly, in our experience, given the way that assessment is run at many institutions, these concerns are just.

One way to structure assessment so that it better supports improved student learning is to connect assessment with the expert intuitions that faculty and staff have about how best to improve the educational impact of their programs. From the standpoint of an assessment office, this is a more demanding approach because it doesn't lend itself to one-size-fits-all reports, grids, or calendars. It requires assessment leaders to listen carefully to their colleagues, learn what they are trying to do to improve student learning, and build assessment processes around those yearnings. It means taking seriously the Latin root of the word "assessment," *assidere*, which can be translated as "sit beside." Keri, Julia, and Mark's work embodies this consultative, collaborative approach. They listen to their colleagues in meetings, conversations about developing mini-grant proposals, and workshops, and think about how they can develop and implement assessment mechanisms that will advance their colleagues' efforts to improve student learning.

This consultative approach, in our view, is the foundation of the Office of Assessment's excellent work. It was clear from the conversations that we had throughout our visit that people at MSU view the Office of Assessment as an asset, and Keri, Julia, and Mark as colleagues who will listen and find ways to support their work. In our view, Keri, Julia, and Mark do the best job of implementing a consultative and supportive approach to assessment that we've ever seen.

II. Lived mission and vision

According to its website, the Office of Assessment's mission is, "...to support assessment for improvement at the university, college, department and program level." The website also states the office's vision to be, "...flexible thinking partners in assessment efforts at Missouri State University." In our view, this mission and vision are perfect. They are clear, succinct, and accurate.

III. Assessment grants

We met with Ruth Walker (Psychology), Ethan Amidon (Criminology), Rhonda Stanton (English), and David Rohall (Sociology) to talk about their assessment grants. Three things struck us about this thoughtful and engaging conversation. First, we noted how easy and formative the process of developing an assessment grant was for the faculty. Keri and her team make it easy to apply for an assessment grant. They've removed any extraneous barriers to applying for these grants. But it's not easy money. They also work with applicants and grantees to develop their projects. That leads to the second point - the projects were all quite good. From creating coherence among the sections of the statistics and methods courses in psychology to asking thoughtful questions about the differences in online versus face-to-face courses in sociology, the faculty were engaging in thoughtful, high-impact assessment projects. Third, and finally, the learning bang-for-the-buck of these projects was impressive. Our guess is that from these few projects alone, many hundreds of students across four departments benefited from grants the total cost of which was no more than a couple thousand dollars. Indeed, most of the expenses in the grants were devoted to creating time for people to get together and make sense of things. Not only is that an impressive return-on-investment for students, but it's also an impressive return-on-investment for a faculty development activity.

IV. Summer workshops

Institutions across the country are switching from standardized tests to examining student work with rubrics as a means of assessing programs. Typically, they take one of two approaches to using rubrics. The first is to use evaluations of student work with rubrics as a way of developing institution-level scores that can be compared against rubric-graded student work from other institutions. This approach to using rubric-graded assignments ends up being similar to how institutions used standardized tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) or ETS Proficiency Profile to develop comparable data. The second approach is to focus the process of evaluating student work with rubrics on developing faculty skills and understanding about what students are learning. That is, to create events that foster faculty conversations about assignments, the strengths and weaknesses that they see in student work, and ways they might revise their classes to improve student work.

In our experience, the latter approach is far more likely to benefit faculty and student learning. Standardized tests like the CLA and ETS have fallen out of favor in recent years because they provide little information that faculty can use to improve their courses. Nationally, the emerging best practice with rubric-graded student work is to use student work as an opportunity for faculty development. This is precisely what the Office of Assessment is doing with its summer assessment workshops. The 2017 Public Affairs Assessment Workshop and the 2018 Human Cultures and Information Literacy Assessment Workshop are the kinds of assessment activities that have the biggest impact on student learning precisely because they engage faculty in conversations and reflection about the work of their students. And these conversations are far more likely to lead to action than a score on a standardized test suggesting that MSU students are better or worse than average. The feedback from the 2017 workshop includes a number of comments from faculty on how the workshop suggested changes in their courses, such as:

- "I will use more Public Affairs terminology in lectures and assignments."
- "As a result of these activities, I am planning to make more explicit the goals and SLOs in my assignments."

- “I’m more aware of the need to find ways to make connections between students’ academic learning and their service-learning experiences, as well as the connection to Public Affairs.”

The feedback on opportunities for improvement also shows positive faculty engagement with assessment and provides ideas about how to improve assessment to make it more useful to their work. (See <https://www.missouristate.edu/assessment/paaw-2017-feedback.htm>.)

In developing these workshops, the Office of Assessment has created another pathway for using assessment evidence in a way that positively engages the work of faculty on behalf of student learning. We suggest that MSU students and faculty would benefit if the funds that are currently used for standardized tests and surveys that are not having an impact on student learning were dedicated to supporting these kinds of summer assessment workshops.

V. Assessment Council

We think that the Assessment Council is an important part of MSU’s assessment infrastructure. The Assessment Council makes recommendations to the provost on issues related to assessment. And while the council may be a body that, according to the university organizational chart, reports to the provost, its true function is deeper and richer. It was clear from our conversation with the Assessment Council that its members are advocates for students, student learning, and doing assessment in a way that results in useful information for making improvements. As one person put it, they are “Assessment Ambassadors” who say that assessment is “not extra work; it’s work you’re already doing.” The membership of the council reaches across the institution, and the conversations among members of the council seem to counteract the centripetal force of siloing that afflicts all complicated organizations.

The Assessment Council is an excellent group for helping Keri keep tabs on what’s happening at MSU and identify opportunities for the Office of Assessment. The council also helps by giving feedback on surveys and other possible assessment initiatives. Furthermore, the council is a means by which Keri can get the word out about upcoming programs and opportunities via the networks in which the council members are embedded. In our work, we’ve seen many advisory committees composed of faculty and staff that serve assessment offices. However, the combination of the Assessment Council’s link to the provost, its broad representation from across the university, and the clear commitment among committee members to student success make it unique. It’s a good committee.

Things to consider

Developing strategic focus

It should be clear at this point in our report that we think that Keri and her colleagues are doing an excellent job in the Office of Assessment. Indeed, it is one of the most effective assessment offices that we’ve ever seen. And spending time with good thinking partners like Keri, Julia, and Mark, and their colleagues across MSU, inevitably leads to brainstorming about all kinds of possibilities for how the Office of Assessment could extend its impact. We will review some of these possibilities below. First, however, we want to pause and mark what we see as an important item for Keri, her colleagues in the Office of Assessment, the Assessment Council, and the provost to consider - namely, is it time for more focus? That is, given the many current and possible ways that the Office of Assessment could advance student learning at MSU, which 3, 4, or 5 activities are the ones on which the Office of Assessment should focus, and which activities should it turn away?

Over the last five years, Keri and the Office of Assessment have developed an effective model of how to engage the MSU community to conduct assessment in a way that will benefit students. When a new organization forms within a community, it is natural for that organization to experiment and take as many opportunities as possible to

make a difference. The Office of Assessment has successfully done that, and we believe that the office is now entering the next phase in its work in which the opportunities to have a positive impact exceed its capacity to advance those opportunities. In our view, it's now time to ask hard questions about which opportunities are most likely to advance the mission of MSU and the Office of Assessment and which opportunities, no matter how interesting, would be appropriate to pass up. We understand that every office in a university will be called upon to support some tasks that are important to the university and may not be aligned completely with the mission of the office. But, there's only so much that an office of three people can do without diminishing the quality and impact of its work. The entrepreneurial spirit that runs through the Office of Assessment is wonderful, but it can also dilute the impact of its small staff. It may also be time to consider a "zero-sum" approach to project management where taking on any new project has to be offset by sunsetting another project, or projects, of comparable workload.

To our eyes, the assessment grants, work supporting general education assessment (including summer workshops), and "one-off" short-term consultations to help departments, programs, or courses with assessment is a pretty full plate. We have no doubt that the Office of Assessment's task list is bigger than this. If we're correct, and if the three tasks we listed here are the most important tasks, then what tasks can the Office of Assessment eliminate?

Focused help for the Council on General Education and Intercollegiate Programs (CGEIP)

One of the dirty little secrets in higher education is that practical considerations lead to general education programs that are almost designed to confound student learning. Typically, general education programs consist of clusters of courses, with clusters meeting one of 10 or more broad outcomes. There may be dozens of sections of many of these courses, and frequently only a subset of the courses are taught each semester. What this means from the students' perspective is that they end up sampling from a large set of courses, most of which are taught by dozens of different instructors, in more or less random order, at varying points in their undergraduate careers. General education programs look coherent in the course catalog, but if you look at the many different paths that students follow to complete their general education requirements, these programs look haphazard.

Like most other institutions, MSU's general education program suffers from some of the qualities we described above. Given limited resources, this is how institutions often implement general education. But, it was clear from our conversations with both CGEIP and the General Education Coordinators that faculty want to make the general education program have impact. The process that CGEIP and the General Education Coordinators are now using is a good start, but it's going to need significant tuning. General Education Coordinators need more consistent and useful feedback from CGEIP. The General Education Coordinators also need more support and guidance so that they can work more effectively with their colleagues who are teaching sections of the courses they coordinate. And, as is the norm for new general education programs, the general education outcomes will have to be tuned, revised, replaced, or eliminated to make the program more effective.

We are concerned that the process CGEIP is using to assess general education will not be sustainable because it creates too much work and not enough impact. One approach that CGEIP, the Office of Assessment, and the General Education Coordinators might try is a variation of a collaborative workshop approach that Cleveland State University and Marquette University created. In this approach, faculty participate in 1- or 2-day workshop in which they work in teams of 3-6 people to review, make sense of, and summarize what they learned from 4-6 assessment reports. The teams might also use a rubric to evaluate the reports and give brief, formative feedback to the people who authored the reports on what was valuable about the reports and how the reports might be improved. The key is that this work is done in collaboration, with teams conversing about the reports and then filling out short forms on what they learned from the reports. This kind of workshop could follow the structure of the rubric workshops that the Office of Assessment is already leading, in which the summaries from the teams are

combined in real time and distributed to all of the faculty in the workshop. There could also be time for reflection and conversation among and across teams about the patterns they see in the summaries.

We hope this brief sketch gives you an idea of how an annual assessment workshop or retreat can be used to create a collaborative assessment process instead of isolating the work of assessment among the members of CGEIP. And this is an area where the Office of Assessment can play an important role in helping CGEIP to create a more engaging and useful assessment process. There's good will both on the part of CGEIP and among the General Education Coordinators. There's a serious intention to use assessment formatively, and there's a reasonable initial process. Given the way it approaches assessment, the widespread respect for Keri and her colleagues, and their success in implementing assessment workshops with rubrics, the Office of Assessment is ideally suited to refine the way that general education is assessed to make it less burdensome and more effective. But make no mistake, this is a 5-year project at the very least, in part because it requires building a deeper culture of reflection and improvement for the general education program.

Changing Keri Franklin's title

Keri's title, "Director of Assessment," implies that she has responsibility for assessment at Missouri State University. While Keri and her office play a remarkable role in a wide range of assessment activities at the university, she is not responsible for how assessment is conducted in many departments and programs, nor should she be. Colleges, departments, and programs have developed their own assessment processes to fit their cultures and needs, and they value having this ownership. This decentralized assessment model seems to work for MSU, and we see no need to change things. We think that people at MSU have a clear sense of Keri's role and responsibilities, but people from outside of the institution, especially accreditors, may misunderstand the extent to which Keri plays a role in how assessment is implemented by a significant number of departments and programs in the university. We wonder if her Office might be renamed the "Office of Assessment Support," and she could be the director of that office. Our concern here is that external audiences might place the blame for assessment problems on Keri's doorstep, when those issues could occur in areas of the university over which she has no authority.

Opportunities

Based on what we've said above, we are thinking of these opportunities either as short-term consultations or, if they require more effort, something that would be in the strategic interests of the university and the Office of Assessment to serve as a replacement for a current project.

Meta-assessment

Meta-assessment is a fancy term for the work of an increasing number of assessment offices to serve as consultants for departments, programs, and colleges to review current assessment programs and provide feedback on how processes might be streamlined and revised to create greater positive impact on student learning. So, the Office of Assessment might review current assessment programs on a one-at-a-time-basis and provide feedback on whether departments and programs are doing assessment in a way that will 1) ensure the quality of the institution-level KPIs, 2) provide a good ROI (e.g., Does learning improve at a level concomitant to faculty effort? Are there processes that will keep faculty engaged and prevent them from becoming cynical?), and 3) facilitate learning so that knowledge about assessment isn't siloed.

Support for program reviews

The Office of Assessment could also engage department heads in conversations about assessment in the months prior to departments' program reviews to provide suggestions on how they might more fruitfully use evidence and instill more open and formative reflection about student learning and the departments' strengths, opportunities,

and weaknesses in their departmental reviews. Once again, like meta-assessment, the goal of this kind of consultation would be to help departments get more value out of their reviews and turn them into less of a pro forma report writing exercise.

During the course of our visit, it also occurred to us that the Library, Alumni Affairs, and even Student Affairs might benefit from having friendly, knowledgeable, and thoughtful colleagues look at their assessment processes with the goal of offering some observations about what's working well and making suggestions on how their efforts might be streamlined and offer more fruit.

Review the prompts for the public affairs essays

We noted that in some years, faculty evaluations of public affairs essays were low, with over half of the students scoring at the benchmark or milestone level as seniors. After reviewing the prompts, we worried that they may, inadvertently, be leading students to underperform. The prompts are targeted appropriately at the outcomes, but they are high-level questions with little context. Take the question, "Discuss in detail and/or analyze your core beliefs about ethical leadership and the origins of your beliefs." This is a hard question. Imagine asking a faculty member or administrative leader to respond to this question, knowing that it would be graded, without any kind of context for what constitutes a good answer or, perhaps, a chance prior to that moment to reflect on the question. We don't know how often students have an opportunity to reflect on the kinds of questions that they will encounter in the public affairs essays, nor do we know whether they've received any guidance in the past on what constitutes a thoughtful response to such questions. We also don't know whether students are shown the rubric that will be used to evaluate their responses. But, a lack of prior opportunities to connect their experiences with high-level questions such as these or not knowing what MSU considers to be a thoughtful response may substantially lower the quality of their responses. It would be worthwhile to conduct focus groups of seniors who've already written these essays to learn more about how they thought about and responded to these prompts as means of ensuring that the public affairs essay prompts are adequately gauging what they've learned.

Final suggestions

We conclude with three final suggestions. First, if they haven't already done so, we suggest that Keri and her colleagues develop a few simple KPIs to keep track of the activities of the Office of Assessment. For example, KPIs might include the number of meetings they've held; the number of people, departments, or programs that the Office of Assessment has consulted with; the number of assessment grant applications; attendance at summer assessment workshops; etc. Our sense is that such measures might help Keri and her colleagues have a more precise sense of the work of their office and how it is changing. Second, we suggest that the Office of Assessment continue to explore ways to directly engage students in the work of assessment. There are a number of ways to do this effectively, and we're glad to have a follow-up conversation about this. But in our conversations with students both in this and in our prior visit, we were impressed with their reflections on their educational experiences at MSU. Our experience at other institutions has shown time and again that students' perspective on their learning is both useful and often surprising to faculty and staff. As it turns out, we may not know our students as well as we think. Third, and finally, we'd like to follow up with Keri and her colleagues about their strategy for administering surveys and reporting survey results. The question that we'd like to ask is the extent to which Keri and her colleagues feel that they are getting "impact bang" for the bucks that MSU is spending on surveys. We apologize for not raising this issue during our visit. We raise it here because many of the institutions that we work with administer surveys out of habit rather than because those surveys provide useful information. In our view, if a survey is not leading to actions that benefit students, then either the survey should be dropped and the funds for that survey redirected to activities that do have positive impact or the process for reporting and making use of the data from the survey must change. We are glad to have a follow-up conversation with Keri and her colleagues on this point.

Conclusions

We enjoyed our visit to MSU. Keri, Julia, and Mark are doing great work. More than that, they have a deep commitment to improving the learning of students, faculty, and staff. Likewise, we had thoughtful, interesting, and enjoyable conversations with many of their colleagues across the institution. We experienced a sense of care, thoughtfulness, and commitment to learning that we don't experience very often in our travels. To us as outsiders, MSU feels like a very good place.

We're happy to talk more about anything we've written in this memo or about things that you'd like us to touch on that we neglected in this report. As always, we're glad to help in any way we can. We look forward to following the work of the MSU Office of Assessment so that we can learn from it and bring what we learn to other institutions.