

To: Keri Franklin, Kelly Cara, and Sarah Gray  
cc:  
From: Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise  
Date: October 28, 2013  
RE: Follow-up memo from our October 2013 visit

On October 7-9, 2013 we visited Missouri State University (MSU) to review the institution's current assessment processes and suggest ways to enhance assessment for improvement efforts, with attention to the role of the Office of Assessment and plans to assess MSU's new general education program. During our visit we met with a number of different groups including:

- Staff from the Office of Assessment
- Deans or their representatives from the various colleges
- Members of MSU's senior administration, including the President, Provost, Vice President of Student Affairs, and Associate Provost for Student Development and Public Affairs
- Members of the Committee on General Education and Intercollegiate Programs (CGEIP)
- The Director of Institutional Research
- The Provost Fellow for Faculty Development
- A group of undergraduate students
- Representatives from the General Education Assessment Coordinators and the Assessment Council
- A class of second-year students in the graduate Student Affairs program
- Members of the Student Affairs Council Assessment and Planning Committee

We appreciated the opportunity to meet and talk with faculty, staff, administrators, and students at MSU about assessment. Our conversations were thoughtful and frank, and the time and effort that over two dozen people put into meeting with us to engage in these conversations shows the commitment of the MSU community to both the current staff and the work of the Office of Assessment.

We begin below by reviewing a number of practices and principles of effective assessment programs that we have encountered in our work and that we feel are relevant to the emerging role of MSU's Office of Assessment. Next we will review some of the strengths and challenges related to assessment at MSU that emerged for us during our conversations, and we will conclude with suggestions about how MSU's Office of Assessment might structure its work to advance student learning.

### **Good practices and principles for assessment**

1. *The purpose of assessment is change, not gathering data.*  
The quality of an assessment program should be gauged by the extent to which evidence-based educational experiments result from assessment activities in a timely manner.

2. *Assessment must be useful.*

If faculty and staff cannot identify the immediate usefulness of any assessment activity for improving their courses, departments, or programs, they will view the activity as bureaucratic busy work that takes them away from their teaching and scholarship.

3. *Assessment is about communication.*

Although accurate, high-quality data analysis is an essential component of assessment, it is only a small component of the work necessary to move from gathering evidence to change. High-impact assessment work is conversational and consultative, requiring face-to-face work with faculty, staff, and administrators who are interested in using evidence to improve the educational impact of their work. Faculty and staff do not change their practice as a result of reading a report, chart, or graph; they do so when they see how assessment evidence connects to their work. The most important skills for an effective assessment office are the interpersonal and “soft” leadership skills that help people see these connections. These include the ability to make clear presentations on evidence without using statistical, social science, or assessment jargon; the capacity to frame assessment work in the disciplinary styles and methodologies of the people with whom the office works; the ability to facilitate inquiry about student learning by helping faculty and staff troubleshoot when they sense that things are not working as they would like but they cannot identify the source of their discontent and then identifying ways of collecting and interpreting evidence to address these concerns; and the ability to bring lessons learned from other successful assessment projects to bear on current projects.

4. *It is critical that an institution differentiates between assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability.*

Institutions should create different structures and processes for formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment focuses on helping faculty and staff gather, make sense of, and use information about what and how students are learning so that they can improve their classes, programs, and departments. This approach to assessment is, essentially, a form of professional development, and it is aimed at supporting the normal, ongoing efforts of staff and faculty to improve the impact of their work with students.

Summative assessment, on the other hand, focuses on gathering evidence so that some outside audience can make and act on a summary judgment about a course, a department, a component of the curriculum, or a program. In essence, under this approach, some component or components of the institution are being called on to account for what they accomplish. When we use the phrase “outside audience,” we do not point only to audiences outside of the institution, but also to audiences within the institution that are “outside” of the courses, departments, or programs in question. When a college committee or an administrator evaluates the effectiveness of a particular program, they are doing so from a perspective that is “outside” that of the people who are engaged daily in implementing that program. Moreover, when people are being called to account for their departments, programs, or courses, they are far more likely to

focus on highlighting evidence that points to the effectiveness of these departments, programs, or courses as they defend their good work to others. Although finding weaknesses in a department, program, or course in a summative context is important, doing so also carries risk for the people whose work is being evaluated.

Using evidence on student learning and the conditions that support student learning is valid for serving both institutional improvement and institutional accountability efforts. However, in our experience, to be effective the institutional and governance structures engaged in these two approaches to assessment must respect the different processes necessary to support each approach. In order to encourage open inquiry into what is and is not working for students, we advise institutions to “firewall” information from formative assessment efforts from summative processes like promotion and tenure or departmental reviews. Creating such firewalls helps to create space for faculty and staff to openly probe, consider, seek help with, and respond to instances in which their efforts are not as effective as they would like. Indeed, in highly effective programs, good faculty and staff are adept at locating, discussing, and responding to weaknesses in their efforts. Successfully identifying problems, in this context, is the sign of good work and entails no risk to the people participating in the assessment.

### **Assessment strengths at MSU**

We noted the following strengths, both in the Office of Assessment and for the university at large, during our conversations:

- There are individuals, departments, and programs across the university that are engaged in high-quality, useful assessment.
- MSU recently completed a thoughtful, well-organized revision of its general education program. In our experience, many institutions start the process of general education reform but few complete it quickly and some never manage to get the necessary constituencies to agree on a new general education program .
- New leadership in Student Affairs with experience in assessment who is focused on reviewing and upgrading the quality of assessment in the student affairs division.
- Graduate students in MSU’s Student Affairs program who are interested and engaged in high-quality institutional assessment projects.
- Undergraduate students who are interested in reflecting on and discussing their educational experiences at MSU and are capable of providing useful qualitative information for MSU’s assessment efforts.
- Strong support across the institution for both the Office of Assessment and Keri Franklin’s appointment as the leader of that office.

- The Office of Institutional Assessment has a strong staff, all of whom have the interpersonal skills, poise, and deep institutional knowledge necessary to engage in the kind of assessment work we have described above.

### **Assessment mixed blessings**

A recent change at MSU presents both a strength and a challenge for the institution's assessment efforts. Our understanding is that at one point in the recent past, the institution attempted to use an assessment "template" that was seen as standardizing the approach that departments, colleges, and programs used to develop and report on their assessment efforts, and that this standardized approach was rejected. In response, academic units were given much more flexibility in how they both designed and reported on their assessment efforts.

The positive benefit of this more customized approach is that it allows departments and programs to develop ways of gathering and making sense of evidence about student learning that are consistent with their disciplinary expertise. Allowing for this flexibility results in less resistance to assessment. The negative consequence of this approach is that the findings, methods, and lessons learned are rarely communicated effectively outside of the units that are engaging in the assessment work. Not only does this mean that there is little opportunity for people in different departments and programs to learn from one another about the results of their assessment efforts, but also that academic leaders, especially senior academic leaders, do not have ready knowledge of what departments and programs are learning from these efforts.

Given some of the things we heard about recent conflicts at MSU, we realize that this lack of transparency about assessment results, both vertically and horizontally across MSU's organizational structure, may in fact be a desirable consequence for some at the institution. However, it is important to move past these recent events for the benefit of MSU students. Based on our review of some of MSU's institutional data, we see that there are important potential weaknesses in the institution's teaching and learning environment that need to be addressed in the near future, and increased transparency about assessment results will be necessary for these changes to occur.

### **Assessment challenges at MSU**

In addition to the challenge of communicating knowledge about, and thereby finding coherence in, the institution's various assessment efforts, we observed a number of additional challenges that the Office of Assessment will face. These include:

- An atmosphere of distrust and fear concerning the use of assessment results to cut programs, eliminate courses, and negatively influence tenure and promotion decisions. These fears, in our view, are based, in part, on recent conflicts between the administration, staff, and faculty; high turnover in many leadership positions; but also the reality that the university does intend to use assessment data for all of these purposes. For example, we noted that in the section of MSU's Program Review Guidelines titled "Consequences of the Program Review Process," it states, "Most programs will be recognized for their conscientious efforts to improve quality and as such, they will

continue to be sustained. *Hopefully, only a small number of programs will appear to be in need of serious corrective action.*” (Italics added) It is not clear from this passage whether assessment results showing that a program is struggling with student learning would be used as the basis for cutting a program. Likewise, in our conversations with the CGEIP it was clear that the committee wanted to use assessment results to determine whether courses should remain eligible for continuing in MSU’s general education program, but they were struggling with whether their role should be (1) to “police” whether general education courses met student learning outcomes and to eliminate those that were not meeting key learning outcomes or (2) to provide faculty development to help faculty improve the effectiveness of these courses. We also heard that some consideration is being given to including classroom assessment evidence in faculty tenure and promotion portfolios.

We are not suggesting that evidence should not be used to inform decisions. Rather, that institutions should be careful to keep separate those processes in which assessment is used summatively for decision making from those in which assessment is used formatively to support faculty and staff efforts to improve student learning.

- Many faculty with whom we spoke do not see any payoff between institutionally-required assessment and their efforts to improve their courses, departments, or programs. Institutionally-required assessment is generally viewed as a “box checking” process that people must complete with no benefit for their own effectiveness as teachers.
- Most institution-level assessment data, including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the ETS Proficiency Profile, do not appear to have any consequential impact on the institution. As far as we can tell, outside of issuing reports, there are no established processes for connecting information from such institutional data with faculty and staff course and program development.
- An assessment program that has focused almost entirely on measuring outcomes and not the teaching practices and conditions that support student learning and growth on those outcomes. In our view, this is especially unfortunate because MSU’s NSSE data, the recent analysis of student growth on the institution’s public affairs learning outcomes, and our conversations with students indicated that there is significant variability in instructional quality in the larger section courses, including an overemphasis on lectures that simply repeat material from the textbook and tests that require memorization and simple recall.

### **Suggestions for the Office of Assessment**

One office cannot meet all of these challenges. However, the challenge that the Office of Assessment can meet is to lead institution-level assessment efforts, and to pull together and form a coherent picture of the disparate assessment work that is taking place in units across the university. In essence, we suggest that the Office of Assessment serve as a curator for

institutional leaders, faculty, and staff about what people at MSU are learning about student learning. Specifically, we suggest the following mission for the MSU Office of Assessment:

1. To gather, make sense of, and summarize what practitioners at MSU are learning about student learning, and to develop ways of communicating useful information about these results vertically and horizontally across the institution. This would include collecting assessment work from all areas of the university -- colleges, departments, programs, and student affairs.
2. To assess and advance student learning on the university's public affairs mission.
3. To serve as a campus resource for practitioners from across the university who are engaging in assessment.

We suggest the following guiding principles for how the Office of Assessment operates:

1. The Office of Assessment should emphasize consultative, face-to-face interactions with individuals, departments, programs, and colleges throughout the university, rather than using reports or web content as the primary means of communicating with and supporting the MSU community.
2. The Office of Assessment should not be engaged in approving or rejecting courses for inclusion in particular programs or in making decisions about departments, courses, or programs that have ramifications for resource allocation or the continued existence of those departments, courses, or programs. Instead, 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 a resource for individuals and units on campus that seek to improve their educational impact.

We also suggest the following specific duties for the Office of Assessment:

- Assessing the public affairs mission of the university and developing actions in response to data from these assessments. This includes implementing development activities for faculty and staff that result from the assessment of student progress on the public affairs mission.
- Identifying and leading the analyses of useful institution-level surveys to assess institutional teaching practices and conditions at MSU.
- Conducting focus groups as a means of following up on institution-level surveys, to identify practices, conditions, courses, programs, and experiences that both benefited and detracted from student learning at MSU.

- Developing and implementing strategies for disseminating information from institution-level surveys and focus groups to relevant leaders, faculty, staff, and students in different units across the institution to facilitate their efforts to improve student learning.
- Helping departments, colleges, and other units of the university that are responsible for student learning see the connection between their work and institutional surveys, findings from student focus groups, and the assessment findings and processes of other units on campus. In essence, fostering the development of a cross-department, cross-college, and cross-program community of practice focused on assessment.
- Developing and updating periodic SWOT analyses for MSU's senior leadership on the progress and impact of assessment efforts in departments, programs, colleges, and the general education program. Please note our emphasis on examining and describing strengths *and* weakness, as well as opportunities *and* threats. In our view, the goal of these analyses would be to provide candid evaluations of MSU's assessment efforts.
- Seeking out collaborations with units on campus, such as Student Affairs and the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, to gather, make sense of, and develop actions in response to assessment data that will advance the efforts of the Office of Assessment.

In order to support the mission and activities that we describe above, we believe that the Office of Assessment should have a budget sufficient to support the following:

- Administration of institution-level surveys on the conditions that support student learning.
  - We suggest NSSE and a combination of the CIRP Freshman Survey (TFS) and the CIRP College Senior Survey (CSS) administered on different three-year rotations, with the TFS and CSS administered so that they provide longitudinal information.
- Faculty and staff development activities that the Office of Assessment will develop in response to their assessment of MSU's public affairs mission.
- Faculty and staff workshops on assessment that the Office of Assessment will develop in response to institutional survey data and focus groups, as well as in support of other campus assessment efforts that connect with the office's mission.
- \$250-\$500 grants for faculty and staff that the Office of Assessment could distribute to support innovative assessment projects.
- Professional development activities for the Office of Assessment staff.

We suggest that the Office of Assessment consider the following ways of working with different MSU administrative offices and committees as a means of effectively implementing the mission we described above:

- Institutional Research - Continue to divide labor with Institutional Research, so that Institutional Research administers institutional surveys such as NSSE, and the Office of Assessment makes sense of, reports on, and otherwise makes use of the data. Given the upcoming change in MSU's Director of Institutional Research position, we also suggest that the Office of Assessment and the new Director of Institutional Research develop a plan for how the two offices should collaborate. We believe that institutional data will play a more important role in departmental, program, and institutional assessment efforts, and that it will be useful to connect such data to the institutional surveys that the Office of Assessment will use. Thus, the two offices will need to collaborate effectively on a number of complicated areas to advance MSU's efforts to improve student learning.
- Committee on General Education and Intercollegiate Programs (CGEIP) - The CGEIP is about to embark on a complicated process of evaluating student learning in MSU's new general education program and determining, based on these findings, whether and how to recertify courses for eligibility for this program. We suggest that the Office of Assessment can provide support for CGEIP by providing an annual review of the quality of course assessment plans and results from a random sample of 10-15 courses in the general education program. The purpose of this review would not be to make judgments about whether these courses are demonstrating sufficient evidence of changes in student learning such that they can remain in MSU's general education program, but to give the committee a SWOT analysis of the trends in, quality of, and lessons learned from the assessment efforts in these courses. This kind of analysis would be consistent with the suggested mission for the Office of Assessment, "To gather, make sense of, and summarize what practitioners at MSU are learning about student learning," that we described above.
- Assessment Council - We suggest that the charge of this committee going forward would be to serve as a faculty and staff advisory board for the Office of Assessment, giving practitioner advice and feedback on reports, communication strategies, and survey recommendations, and generally serving as a sounding board for the Office of Assessment. We suggest that the director of the Office of Assessment serve as the chair of the Assessment Council, setting the agenda and providing summaries of the committee's work, and that the other members of the Office of Assessment's staff and the administrative leader to whom the director of the Office of Assessment reports serve as *ex officio* members of the committee.
- Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL) - The FCTL website indicates that it provides broad support for institutional assessment efforts, stating "We aim to promote the enhancement of teaching and learning environments across different teaching



modalities, improve student learning outcomes by providing guidance and support toward the understanding and implementation of best practices, and provide support in the creation and implementation of assessment plans for programs and classrooms.” (<http://www.missouristate.edu/fctl/117470.htm>). However, most of the work of the FCTL appears to be focused on supporting the use of technology for instruction. If that is the case, then this is another unit of the institution that the Office of Assessment should include in its review of university assessment efforts.

Other suggestions and/or thoughts for the Office of Assessment at MSU:

- We urge the Office of Assessment to continue its current supportive, conciliatory, client-centered, and consultative approach to working with faculty, staff, and administrators. Assessment work is both challenging and threatening, and the office’s current way of working with people across campus is a necessary step toward reducing the fear that often accompanies assessment.
- Take advantage of the current “Assessment Shorts” to begin to disseminate “bite-sized” information about student learning to the MSU community. We are not suggesting that this should be the sole means of communicating with the community, only that it is an already existing mode of communication that the Office of Assessment can extend.
- Consider developing communication plans that resemble segmented marketing campaigns so that anytime the Office of Assessment begins to report on some aspect of its work, it identifies and develops a strategy for each of the multiple audiences on campus to whom the office will reporting.
- The Office of Assessment should identify a set of goals for the upcoming academic year and review its progress on these goals monthly. The office should post both these goals and the monthly reviews on its progress toward these goals on its website. The goal of taking these two steps is to first, help the Office make progress in its work, and second, show that the Office of Assessment models the kinds of transparency that all units of the university should exhibit.
- Be sure to review and update the entire Office of Assessment website on a regular basis so that it is current.

The mission and activities we describe above will not be possible unless the Provost authorizes the Office of Assessment to gather information on assessment from colleges, departments, programs, and other relevant units of the university. Deans, department chairs, program directors, committee chairs, and other campus leaders will need to understand that a request from the Office of Assessment for information on assessment methods, findings, and other relevant items carries the authority of the Provost’s Office. This means, of course, that the Office of Assessment will need to review its requests for information with the Provost, or some leader

designated by the Provost, prior to sending these requests out to members of the university community.

We enjoyed our visit to MSU, and we are enthusiastic about the quality of the Office of Assessment's staff and the office's potential for assisting and sharpening the efforts of MSU faculty, staff, and administrators to improve student learning. We are also happy to continue the conversation about these suggestions and any aspect of the Office of Assessment's work. At the very least, we understand that we have summarized a lot information in this memo and further conversations may be helpful in making sense of what we have written. We look forward to those and any other conversations.