

ASSESSMENT AND EFFECTIVENESS PROCESS

Introduction

This document is intended to share with the reader a context for the conduct of assessment and the current strategic and systematic process for improving the quality of student learning at West Virginia State University (WVSU). The University's Assessment and Effectiveness Process (AEP) is dynamic and fluid and underpinned by the organization's mission, vision and strategic plan. The descriptions that follow are intended for multiple stakeholders with varying perspectives, all of whom share an interest in the needs and outcomes of learners engaged in study at WVSU. Stakeholders in outcomes assessment for student learning include prospective and enrolled students, alumni, faculty, staff, board of governor members, regulatory bodies, and employers.

The AEP reflects the fact that WVSU continues to nurture a culture that values outcomes assessment and is maturing as an institution that makes determinations about student learning and institutional performance based on data collected through various measures. This approach reflects recognition by the University's leadership that there is equivalent value to efforts to improve accountability by focusing on both *demonstrating* and *improving* quality (Dugan & Hernon, 2006; Collins, 2005; Light, Singer & Willett, 1990). As such, WVSU's approach to outcomes assessment and goal attainment includes the review of academic programs, institutional research, and the effectiveness of all support units and their contributions to student success.

The process of preparing the self-study for a comprehensive reaffirmation of accreditation visit brought many areas to the attention of the University for the potential of process improvement. No one area stood out more across the University as needing additional time and attention than the work of assessment. It became clear early in gathering documentation for the self-study that across the University's four Colleges and many support units assessment was sometimes approached in an informal fashion and documented intermittently. As if the self-study preparation were not sufficient opportunity for reflection and consideration for potential change, the University was simultaneously experiencing some of the most profound leadership changes in its history. The arrival of a new President, the plans to hire a new Provost, the turnover of 3 of the 4 College Deans along with other administrative changes brought many issues to the fore that had not been so readily recognizable previously. Even as the president addressed the creation of

a vigorous new Strategic Plan with the University community, the need for focused attention, training and formal development of a *system* for assessment was being revisited and redefined.

The largest context for the University's operations is its public statements of Mission and Vision in tandem with its declared strategic directions. The current statements that direct all institutional efforts are:

Mission:

West Virginia State University will meet the higher education and economic development needs of the state and region through innovative teaching and applied research.

Vision:

West Virginia State University will become the most student-centered, research and teaching, land-grant university in the State of West Virginia and beyond.

Strategic Initiatives:

- Academic Programs, Research Growth, Faculty Excellence and Rewards and Public Service
- Recruitment, Retention, Degree Completion, Marketing/Branding and the Student Experience
- Building, Renovation and Technological Infrastructure
- Alumni Engagement and Philanthropic Giving

Historical Context

WVSU is committed to student learning and achievement for all of its curricular and co-curricular programs. This commitment is reflected in the University's mission and core values, which emphasize the advancement and creation of knowledge through effective teaching and research that promotes student learning and the achievement of student success.

In the University's 2005 HLC review, it was noted that "assessment at WVSU has become a part of the culture of the institution." This evaluation may be due in part to the development of approved assessment plans with clearly defined program-level outcomes for all academic programs.

In the years following the 2005 HLC Self-Study Report, WVSU has continued its efforts to strengthen an institutional culture of assessment and emphasize the importance of the assessment of student learning. However, these efforts have not been without significant challenges. From 2005 forward, assessment measures were taking place, mainly at the course level, though efforts were uneven and inconsistent across the University. The absence of assessment support services and staff resulted in a lack of consistency in the way the institution's academic and co-curricular programs approached the task of ongoing assessment of student learning. Recognizing the need for greater expertise and leadership around assessment issues, WVSU hired a Director of

Institutional Research and Effectiveness and merged the assessment and institutional research functions under one unit. This unit initiated numerous programs and activities to assist the University with its commitment to create a “culture of assessment” throughout its many academic and co-curricular programs. Key achievements included

- development of PLOs for academic programs;
- development of Curriculum Maps for academic programs;
- identification of assessment coordinators assigned to each academic program;
- adoption and implementation of LiveText as a centralized electronic system for collecting and maintaining program-level assessment data; and
- implementation of faculty training and staff support for the development of comprehensive assessment plans for academic programs.

The University continued to build on these achievements towards systemic assessment by creating faculty surveys, conducting focus group sessions, and acquiring feedback from assessment coordinators to identify and prioritize the types of supports needed by faculty to move the assessment process forward. Major needs identified by faculty as part of this process included

- additional training on the development of program-level SLOs;
- additional training on the use of LiveText to generate student learning assessment reports; and
- greater access to technical support for the use of LiveText.

The results of these fact finding efforts were analyzed, and a strategy was developed to address the major concerns. In response to this evaluation of assessment challenges, the University hired an HLC Assessment Academy consultant to conduct two training sessions with assessment coordinators and faculty in spring 2013. Topics focused primarily on the fundamentals of SLOs and curriculum mapping. In addition, the University opened a computer lab that same semester to expand technical support for faculty on the use of LiveText. These more recent activities build on prior initiatives and serve to reinforce WVSU’s commitment to educational achievement and improvement through ongoing assessment of student learning.

The departments continued to work on refining and in some instances developing PLOs and mapping those outcomes to their programmatic curriculum. Additional evaluation of the assessment program at the University continued in fall 2013 by gathering information through meetings with assessment coordinators, an assessment questionnaire, and an assessment status tool, which sought information about assessment planning, data collection and analysis, assessment reporting, and the use of data for continuous improvement. Using this assessment status tool, academic programs provided information about where they were regarding the

assessment of student learning. Results from the self-reported data indicate that all academic programs have developed PLOs and most programs have created curriculum maps that link those outcomes to the courses or activities in which those outcomes will be assessed. Information from all evaluation methods indicated that although academic departments were actively engaged in the assessment process and understood the importance of ongoing assessment, many desired a systematic approach to assessment for guidance and support.

Current Events

During calendar 2014 WVSU was involved in significant conversations and training to re-engage the campus community in the work of assessment measures and improvement processes. The work was undertaken not only as a part of the ongoing interest the university has to improve the student experience but also because of a focus on accomplishing goals that are consistent with intended learning outcomes, unit and strategic plans.

Between February and October 2014 WVSU hosted workshops and consultant visits striving to confirm understanding for some, explore new topics for others and make assessment work more concrete and meaningful for all. Discussions on academic program outcomes, curriculum maps, useful tools and a cycle for measures did lead to important new insights across the colleges. Additionally, all support units participated and created documentation to make their own planning goals and measures both more realistic and consistent with the new Strategic Plan. This work was perhaps the first time in some years that institutional improvement was seen as a shared responsibility with all units contributing to the ultimate goal: student success.

The work product from these sessions are presented in the body of this document: unit Reports on assessment activity looking back one year (including analysis and next steps) and assessment Plans for the next two years that identify both tools and the most likely areas for outcomes measurement. This approach has formalized work that was chiefly informal even though it was conducted regularly and documented within program areas. Now, all academic and support unit Plans and Reports are available to all.

The discussions of the past year underscored the need to re-affirm the role of the Assessment Coordinators and the need for their work to move beyond program boundaries to an approach that allows for more regular meetings and conversations about measures and findings. This work is particularly important in the area of general education since over a period of 4+ years the university has sought to redefine the undergraduate general education distribution requirements and the learning outcomes for all WVSU graduates. The formal adoption of a general education core and specified learning outcomes for all graduates known as the “Essential Graduation Competencies” means that a new dimension of assessment work will be undertaken in the near future. These “Essential Graduation Competencies” are areas of shared responsibility between the general education courses and major fields of study. How and where to approach measuring

these competencies, with what tools and in what cycle will be a large part of the work in the spring of 2015 for Assessment Coordinators.

With the assessment work redefined and aligned with Strategic Planning and embedded in a Program Review, campus stakeholders recognize better the value of the work being asked of them and the need for accountability in goal setting/planning and measuring and sharing results with colleagues. Initial reviews of assessment reports (2013-2014) and conversations about plans for 2014-2015/2015-2016 should be concluded in early spring 2015 by Assessment Coordinators with expectations of clearer direction and next steps. For support units, the end of spring 2015 will bring the first cycle of goal review.

Looking Forward

As WVSU moves through the 2014-15 academic year preparing for its comprehensive site visit, the work of measuring student performance and effectiveness of services is center stage. The workshops and discussions of the past year or so have now moved to action agendas with all areas seeking to understand more about how their efforts impact student success. Coupled with the activity of departments and programs measuring performance is the recognition that there is a new level of accountability. With a new Strategic Plan, a new president, provost and new deans in the colleges, the university is managing process improvement with more intention, purpose and vigor. As assessment findings are shared in the coming months, the challenging next step is to tie results to needed resources so that the alignment of measures, analysis, results and resources can be accomplished.

New leadership in the Provost's Office has brought new perspectives on accountability in academic processes. Though academic Program Review has been in place for years at WVSU, the Provost and faculty now have the opportunity to reconsider the cycle and features of this process making it more vital and relevant to the goals of assessment. As the search for a new Director of Institutional Research, Assessment and Effectiveness continues at WVSU, the work that has been conducted has brought new energy and ideas for evolving assessment and effectiveness plans to a new level.

Work in the spring requires decisions on 1) which groups(s) should be established to provide oversight and collegial assistance with plans and review of results, 2) when is the most practical timeframe for review and feedback to programs and services, 3) how best to communicate findings with others, and 4) how best to move forward with this work keeping it relevant and valuable. Of note, Enrollment Management and Student Affairs has much to contribute to the academic endeavor that has not yet been incorporated into review processes, e.g., sharing of NSSE data, alumni responses, etc., that is certainly useful in program decisions.

It is clear that the university has a great deal of work ahead but that work now has clearer focus and purpose in a larger context of planning and improvement.