

January 15, 2007

TO: Members of Faculty Council

FROM: Kim Mooney, Special Assistant to the President for Assessment

RE: History and Future of the Assessment Committee's Agenda and Activities

In a January 2006 memo, President Sullivan formally established an Assessment Committee with a primary charge of "creating the institutional assessment plan that must accompany our next Middle States accreditation self-study." This overview attempts to document the work accomplished in a year's time to cultivate education and interest in assessment issues on the St. Lawrence campus while taking the fundamental steps necessary to encourage assessment practices in the academic programs and ultimately throughout the institution. The Assessment Committee views its primary charge to help shape and direct where and how assessment takes place, make recommendations about who or what group might take responsibility for the assessment process in various divisions, and consider avenues whereby the assessment results might be broadly shared and subsequently applied to ongoing strategic planning.

As is the case with any assessment project, it is necessary to begin with an understanding and articulation of pursued goals and intended outcomes, and in this case, the St. Lawrence assessment project started in the Academic Affairs division with departments' and programs' learning goals for students.

During the 2005-2006 academic year while academic departments were working on articulating learning goals for their majors and programs, the Assessment Committee took its first steps in educating its members about assessment processes and issues in order to function, not just as a planning body, but as a resource for colleagues. More specifically, we worked to understand better our relationship to the Middle States work, especially the three Standards that most directly address the institution's mission and student learning.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it was the members of the Assessment Committee, not the Middle States Steering Committee that took primary responsibility for generating the Self-Study questions for Standards 1, 7, and 14. The committee also reviewed important St. Lawrence data and documents and relevant books, readings, and assessment web sites at other liberal arts institutions in order to inform weekly conversations and plan a major session for the 2006 May Faculty College.

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<sup>1</sup> Every member of the Assessment Committee serves on a Middle States working groups but their membership and efforts are concentrated on the following: Standard 1: Missions, Goals and Objectives, Standard 7: Institutional effectiveness, and Standard 14: Student Learning.

Over the summer, I worked with the Assessment Committee co-chairs Christine Zimmerman and Carol Bate to develop a web site ([http://www.stlawu.edu/assessment/acad\\_affairs.html](http://www.stlawu.edu/assessment/acad_affairs.html)) to document the institution's assessment and Middle States work, and again, to provide resources for any division involved in ongoing assessment of their goals. We also helped Abbie Bullard '07, the student member of the Assessment Committee, launch a novel project: a "why and how to" handbook on assessment for student organizations. At the end of August, in anticipation of the continuing work in academic department and programs, I sent a number of published resources, including *Student Learning Assessment: Options and Resources* (MSCHE, 2003) to all department chairs.

Early in the fall of 2006, Dean Cornwell asked the Assessment Committee to review the revised learning goals submitted by academic departments and programs in May 2006. Although reviewing such documents is not a formal charge of the Assessment Committee or any other university committee, the Dean believed the Assessment Committee was the group most prepared to provide formative feedback to academic departments and programs about their goals. For the template developed and used by the committee to provide this feedback, please visit the St. Lawrence assessment web site.

Once feedback to chairs and program coordinators was disseminated in mid-October<sup>2</sup>, the Assessment Committee determined that the general education curriculum, or distribution and diversity requirements, should become the next focus of the committee's efforts to educate and generate a plan for how to approach assessment at St. Lawrence. Using AAC&U's *The Art & Science of Assessing General Education Outcomes: A Practical Guide* (Leskes & Wright, AAC&U, 2005) to guide our conversations, the committee generated specific questions about the curriculum that comprised general education at St. Lawrence and about possible ways to begin the assessment of general education. Although the committee plans to undertake a relatively small scale pilot project on the assessment of general education, its purpose is to identify potential processes for completing the assessment and making future recommendations about the assessment loop: establish learning goals, assess the degree to which students are achieving them, use the results to inform future planning, revisit the goals and perhaps modify them based on the assessment results.

The general education project will likely involve the perusal of enrollment data from the registrar's office, the review of CIRP and Senior Survey data from

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<sup>2</sup> Members of the Assessment Committee did not comment on the content or substance of departments' and programs' goals but rather, concentrated on the degree to which goals were stated clearly, framed as learning goals, and could be directly assessed.

the Office of Institutional Research, and the creation of focus groups with students and specific faculty members teaching select general education courses. Currently, no specific university committee is charged with assessing the general education learning goals and curriculum and while the Assessment Committee is piloting a process, it expects to make a recommendation about where this assessment work might best be accomplished in the future.

In summary, the Assessment Committee's work from January 2006-December 2006 has focused on preparing for our involvement in the Middle States Self-Study, supporting the work required by Dean Cornwell's charges to academic department and programs, and generating preliminary plans to approach the assessment of the distribution and diversity requirements. But in order for the Assessment Committee to help develop a smart and comprehensive assessment plan for the Academic Affairs division, it will continue to explore in collaboration with individuals and committees, answers to the questions below about the structures, processes, and responsibility for assessment. Our goal is to use these answers to make recommendations to the Dean by the end of the spring 2007 semester.

- What is the most effective annual cycle of assessment for academic programs?
- How many learning goals should those programs and departments expect to assess?
- How often should they be assessed? Will we establish an assessment cycle?
- Who will be responsible for assessing General Education?
- What type of report will a department or program be expected to produce at the end of its assessment process? What data should be included? What level of future planning should be discussed?
- How might faculty annual activity reports function differently to include assessment components?
- To whom or what body does this report get sent?
- What feedback does this person or group provide back to the individual department or program?
- Whose responsibility is it to pull together the total assessment findings from the annual cycle into the big picture for full-disclosure of potential implications for capital planning and resource allocation decisions?
- What venue exists or needs to be created for a more campus-wide disclosure of assessment information? How might we best share what we have learned and how the outcomes are connected to other divisions' work?
- What impact will the assessment outcomes have on position and budget requests?

The Assessment Committee's charge to create an institutional assessment plan requires that in January 2007 we begin to look beyond academic affairs to other divisions of the university. In order to make progress toward an institutional plan, the committee must begin familiarizing itself with the goals and assessment practices of the other university divisions and with the best practices and tools in administrative assessment. Because we cannot assume that any single university committee could or should oversee every aspect of institutional assessment, we want to think strategically about the oversight of the assessment processes, practices, and applications in the major organizational divisions of the institution. The new Institutional Strategy and Assessment Committee is framed as a receptor of data for the purposes of strategic planning, but is it not charged with "doing" assessment or with the administration of assessment plans. The questions below about assessment in other university divisions will also be under consideration throughout the spring 2007 semester.

- What is the most effective annual cycle of assessment in other university divisions?
- What are the most critical functions/services in administrative areas that provide key support for our institutional mission and student learning outcomes?
- What offices provide these functions/services?
- How should these functions/services be assessed? (What longitudinal data/key indicators/benchmarks are in place? What assessments are missing?)
- Who prepares these assessments?
- Does the current charge of the Institutional Strategy and Assessment Committee need to be expanded?
- Are assessment results summarized? Shared with relevant constituencies?
- To whom or what body do these reports get sent?
- What feedback does this person or group provide to the relevant offices who generated the assessments / who have ownership of the assessment outcome?
- Whose responsibility is it to pull together the total assessment findings from the annual cycle into the big picture for full-disclosure of potential implications for capital planning and resource allocation decisions?
- What venue exists or needs to be created for a more campus-wide disclosure of assessment information? How might we best share what we have learned and how the outcomes are connected to other divisions' work/student learning outcomes?

- What impact will the assessment outcomes have on new initiatives and budget requests?

On behalf of the Assessment Committee, thank you for the attention and thoughtfulness brought to this summary report. Because the preliminary Middle States Self-Study report will be drafted this summer, we welcome your timely feedback on the agenda and work presented in it.

cc: President Sullivan  
Dean Cornwell