

Committee on Institutional Assessment  
Friday, February 10, 2012  
BA-524 9:00 a.m.

Present: Jan Loft, Betsy Desy, Rhonda Bonnstetter, Christine Olson, Jay Brown and Wiji Wijesiri, Lori Baker and Nadine Schmidt.

Agenda:

- CIA webpage improvements
- Discussion of Linda Suskie's Assessment report and suggestion time for accreditation  
**LINDA SUSKIE**

2645 VALLEY VIEW DRIVE  
LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA 17601

717-572-4856  
LINDA.SUSKIE@COMCAST.NET  
[HTTP://LINDA.SUSKIE.HOME.COMCAST.NET](http://LINDA.SUSKIE.HOME.COMCAST.NET)

**Observations and Recommendations on Assessing Student Learning  
at Southwest Minnesota State University  
Based on a Visit on January 25, 2012**

February 7, 2012

I visited Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) to offer advice regarding ongoing compliance with the student learning assessment criteria of the Higher Learning Commission. This report is intended to summarize the key ideas we discussed during my visit.

I note at the outset of this report that I cannot predict any HLC team finding or Commission action, and I cannot guarantee that following the advice in this report will lead to any particular Commission action.

During my visit I met with:

- Interim President Wood and Interim Dean Jan Loft
- Betsy Desy and Lori Baker
- Committee on Institutional Assessment (CIA), Liberal Education Committee (LEC), and HLC Steering Committee
- SMSU Faculty Association members
- SMSUFA officers and members of the Faculty Executive Committee

I found in SMSU a small gem: a campus community that understands and supports the distinctive qualities of southwestern Minnesota and is dedicated to providing the best possible education to its students. Among its many accomplishments and strengths:

- Betsy Desy and Lori Baker have been granted released time for their work on assessment and accreditation, and they are tremendous assets to SMSU; they both have a good understanding of assessment, and they have helped faculty make important strides in laying the foundation for well-conceived ongoing processes to assess program-level and LEP learning outcomes.
- SMSU has established a Committee on Institutional Assessment.
- Some faculty are already engaged in good program-level and LEP assessment practices, and many recently hired faculty are keenly interested and thereby building momentum.
- Promotion and tenure criteria include professional growth and development as well as contributions to student development, allowing work on learning assessment to be recognized and rewarded through the P&T process.

- A faculty retreat in early January 2012 helped faculty make significant progress in articulating and mapping clear statements of program-level learning outcomes.

SMSU is presently engaged in preparing its PEAQ report for an HLC visit in 2013-2014. Despite the commendable groundwork accomplished to date that I have summarized above, I believe that, were the HLC visit held today, the team might find that SMSU is not yet in compliance with HLC's student learning assessment criteria (see attached handout, listing the Gamma version of the criteria), and that the Commission might not act to reaffirm SMSU's accreditation. At this point HLC expects to see not plans and progress toward implementing assessment at some future point, but implemented and sustained assessment processes, with results used to inform plans and resource allocations and to improve student learning and teaching practice. Where assessments have not yet been implemented, it will want to see concrete plans, with timelines and accountabilities rather than, say, a schedule calling for a committee to begin considering how to address an LEP outcome in two or three years.

I am nonetheless fully confident that SMSU has the capacity to demonstrate compliance with HLC's student learning assessment criteria by the time of the team visit. An attached chart summarizes an aggressive but feasible timeline for doing so. SMSU is on the right track; the challenge is to pick up the pace and to create a culture in which assessment is viewed as a natural part of how the SMSU community goes about its business.

I offer just three recommendations to the SMSU community:

**Give faculty compelling reasons to engage in assessment and program review and to do so thoughtfully and meaningfully.** SMSU faculty have been, frankly, burned by what they rightly perceive as a history of pointless assessment reports, annual reports, and program reviews that have sat on shelves. Some—but not all—faculty view learning assessment is an imposition rather than a natural part of good teaching that should be happening regardless of whether or not it is an HLC criterion. Faculty need to understand that, as the university's teachers, they have lead responsibility for assessing student learning, with administrative support. Faculty and administrators need to work together to establish a culture that recognizes, values, and honors work on assessing program-level and LEP learning outcomes as a vital component of life at SMSU. Chapters 5 and 6 of my book *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* (I gave Betsy a copy) offer a number of suggestions in this regard. I highlight the following:

1. Use assessment efforts and results—as well as program reviews—in meaningful, tangible ways to inform plans and decisions, including strategic plans and resource allocation. (*This is an HLC accreditation criterion.*)
2. Use assessment results in proactive, not punitive ways. Assessment results should not be used to decide to cut back or eliminate a program, unless it becomes clear over time that there is little interest or effort in making needed improvements. Such a punitive approach can quickly destroy the integrity of the assessment process. Instead, *support* programs whose assessment results indicate the need for improvement, perhaps by bumping them up the resource allocation list.
3. Consider giving funding priority to those requests supported by systematic assessment evidence... or at least to programs whose faculty have implemented assessment and have submitted needed reports.
4. Consider offering modest "curriculum innovation grants"—funds that faculty can use to research and develop ways to improve student learning—made available only to faculty who have disappointing assessment results for key learning outcomes and who want to improve them.

**Provide faculty with plenty of opportunities to learn about teaching and assessment.** I have never visited a campus whose faculty were more eager to learn about contemporary teaching and assessment practices than SMSU. Sadly, SMSU appears to have virtually no resources to help them learn these vital skills, an extraordinary situation. If faculty have no campus-sponsored opportunities to learn how to teach well—if there is no teaching/learning center, no access to experts, no workshops—how can SMSU be the excellent teaching university that it wants to be? Yes, there are funds controlled by the Chancellor's Office, but access to them is erratic and unreliable. I offer the following suggestions regarding professional development:

1. Identify faculty who might serve as assessment champions, available to help their colleagues through sticky spots in implementing assessment.
2. Host regional teaching/learning/assessment events such as workshops, inviting faculty and administrators from other colleges in the area to attend. SMSU can charge other participants a modest fee, offsetting the expense or even creating a revenue stream. Other colleges in the area will appreciate the low-cost opportunity to offer professional development to their own faculty and administrators.

3. Look into government and foundation grants to work on assessment, perhaps in collaboration with other institutions in the Minnesota state system.
4. Consider making the CIA a standing committee of the Faculty Assembly, to convey both faculty leadership of learning assessment and that assessment is an ongoing part of campus life.
5. Consider ways that the CIA and curriculum committee might work collaboratively to ensure that new and revised courses and programs include, at their onset, systematic assessment of key learning outcomes.
6. My understanding is that \$1300 is provided contractually to each faculty member to use in addressing any of the five required areas for tenure and promotion. I encourage the faculty to explore cost-neutral strategies to inspire and encourage each other to use these funds in ways that not only address individual tenure and promotion areas but also help the faculty achieve communally what is obviously their professional passion: collaborating as a community to understand and improve student learning collectively as well as individually.
7. Charge an appropriate faculty group with identifying cost-neutral ways to recognize and honor faculty work on assessment.

**Keep it simple.** There is a lot of work to be done in the coming months, and it cannot be accomplished unless it is kept simple as well as meaningful. Encouraging faculty to use what they already collect in their classes to document student achievement of program-level and LEP learning outcomes can result in not only less work but also in greater faculty ownership. I offer the following suggestions on keeping assessment efforts as simple as possible.

1. Make student learning assessment a major component of academic program review, because student learning assessment results are a key indicator of program quality and success.
2. Look into existing rubrics that might be adapted for LEP assessment, particularly the VALUE rubrics developed by AAC&U, rather than developing rubrics from scratch.
3. Make clear that assessment tools such as rubrics do not need to be in a common format, which can sometimes amount to squeezing a square peg into a round hole.
4. Make sure that every SMSU student, regardless of the courses and experiences he or she chooses, has sufficient opportunity to achieve every LEP learning outcome. Two LEP outcomes—“continue lifelong learning” and “integrate mind, body, and spirit, the essential elements of a flourishing life”—are problematic in this regard. While they are wonderful intentions, at this point SMSU students are not required to complete any course or experience designed to achieve them. Postpone work on assessing them until curricular and co-curricular requirements are adjusted to that *every* student has a purposeful opportunity to achieve these goals.
5. Consider restating the expectation that faculty develop both “goals” and “outcomes.” Ask faculty instead to identify the key learning outcomes of their program and the key learning opportunities that all students in the program have to achieve those outcomes.

### **A Suggested Timetable for Demonstrating Compliance with HLC Student Learning Assessment**

#### **Criteria**

<b>Date</b>	<b>To Do</b>	<b>Academic Programs Lead Responsibility?</b>	<b>LEP Lead Responsibility?</b>
ASAP	Guidelines and information—with deadlines—are provided to faculty.		
ASAP	Program learning outcomes are clearly articulated.		
ASAP	LEP outcomes are clearly mapped to LEP requirements.		
Spring 2012	Existing evidence of student achievement of program level and LEP learning outcomes is assembled, compiled, summarized, and analyzed.  Assessment tools and strategies (rubrics, test		

	<p>questions, assignments, instructions to faculty, etc.) are developed, where needed, for each identified learning outcome.</p> <p>Implementation details are worked out.</p>		
April 2012	<p>Reports on assessment plans are submitted (to whom?) for review and feedback.</p>		
May 2012	<p>Constructive feedback is provided on assessment plans.</p>		
Fall 2012	<p>Assessments are implemented (and continue to be implemented in subsequent semesters).</p> <p>Evidence of student learning (assessment results) is obtained and summarized (and continues to be obtained and summarized in subsequent semesters).</p>		
Spring 2013	<p>Assessment results are analyzed.</p> <p>Assessment-informed improvements are identified.</p> <p>Improvement implementation is planned.</p> <p>Reports are provided for PEAQ report.</p>		
Fall 2013	<p>Assessment-informed improvements are implemented.</p> <p>Assessments continue to be implemented, summarized, and analyzed.</p>		
Fall 2013?	<p>PEAQ report is finalized.</p>		
Spring 2014?	<p>HLC visit takes place.</p>		

### HLC Learning Assessment Criteria

Gamma Version

November 9, 2011

#### Learning Outcomes

4.B.1. The institution's goals for student learning are *clearly stated*.

4.B.2. The institution assesses achievement of the learning outcomes that it claims for its *curricular and co-curricular programs*.

3.B.2. The institution articulates the... intended learning outcomes of its... *general education requirements*.

#### Rigor

3. The institution provides *high quality* education.

3.A.1. Courses and programs... require *levels of performance* by students *appropriate to the degree* or certificate awarded.

### Ongoing Assessment Processes

4.B. A commitment to educational achievement and improvement through *ongoing* assessment of student learning.

4.B.2. The institution *assesses* achievement of the learning outcomes that it claims for its curricular and co-curricular programs.

### Quality of Assessment Processes

4.B.1. Processes for assessment of student learning and achievement of learning goals are *effective*.

4.B.4. Assessment methodologies and processes *reflect good practice*.

### Use of Assessment Results

4.B.3. The institution uses the information gained from assessment to *improve student learning*.

5.C.2. The institution's processes for *assessment, evaluation, planning and budgeting are linked effectively*.

5.D.2. *Documented evidence of performance routinely informs* the institution's processes for evaluation, planning, and improvement in its operations.

*Compiled by Linda Suskie*

*Attachments:*

PowerPoint slides from two presentations I made during my visit

HLC learning assessment criteria (Gamma version)

Timeline for demonstrating compliance with HLC assessment criteria

- Tasks of CIA and LEC related to accreditation visit
- Ideas to encourage assessment activities by Departments
  - Academic Program Assessment checklist
  - Mini=-grants
- Request from Scott Crowell regarding discussion of assessment within student services—what can we provide
- Other: When is it appropriate to make pending or likely changes? Discover the need for a change during the report and state in the report the change planned, or do you discover the need for the change during data collection and make the change by the final report? Lori Baker will be asked.