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Observations and Suggestions on Assessing Student Learning at Kutztown University Based on a Visit on September 14, 2018

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I visited Kutztown University to offer suggestions on complying with Standard V (Educational Effectiveness Assessment) of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). This report is intended to summarize the key ideas we discussed during my visit.

My visit included meetings with:

- President Hawkinson, his cabinet, deans, and associate deans
- College Assessment Committees (joint meeting)
- Academic Assessment Council
- Chairs and Program Directors

I found in Kutztown a university community that is committed to understanding and improving its assessment of student learning. Among Kutztown's many strengths:

- Carole Wells, Gil Clary, and the Academic Assessment Council and College Assessment Committee members are tremendous assets to Kutztown. Carole and Gil bring have a good understanding of assessment and Middle States expectations that they are bringing to these groups. The groups are already working earnestly, and it is clear that they are university assessment champions; they “get” the importance and value of assessing student learning.
- Kutztown's leadership team supports student learning assessment and demonstrated this through active presence and participation during my visit. I note especially the involvement and support of President Hawkinson, Provost Zayaitz, and the deans; their support is key to developing an enduring culture of assessment that ensures ongoing compliance with MSCHE standards and—far more important—helps take Kutztown to even greater levels of excellence.
- Most academic programs have articulated program learning outcomes, and a sizable portion have developed assessment plans.
- Kutztown faculty have approved and implemented a new general education curriculum based on meaningful, significant learning outcomes.
- Many faculty and administrators understand the importance and value of assessment and are ready to continue to work on assessment. I encountered none of the pushback regarding assessment that I sometimes see at other institutions.
- Overall, there is a commitment to “doing this right”: developing a truly useful and sustainable assessment process, not simply a one-time push that gets Kutztown off warning but is then neglected.

Despite these accomplishments, student learning assessment at Kutztown is not yet where it should be, as I documented in my review in August, and the faculty and administrators I met understand this.

Deciding How Quickly and Aggressively to Get Things Done

My visit was preceded by a visit on September 12 by MSCHE Vice President Idna Corbett. While I think our overall messages were consistent, I suggested a more aggressive schedule to demonstrate compliance with Standard V. It's up to you all to decide which approach is best for the Kutztown community including your students. Neither Dr. Corbett nor I can predict a Commission action or offer any guarantees that a particular approach will lead to a particular action. But obviously the more you do, and the more quickly you do it, the better your chance of coming off warning as early as possible, and the better your chance of minimal follow-up reports once you come off warning.

I think you have three basic options for a schedule:

1. Push everyone to implement as much assessment as possible before the March 1, 2019, report. This would give you your best shot at getting off warning in June and would also be in the best interests of your students, some of whom may not be graduating with the learning achievements you promise. This schedule would be as follows:
 - a. By mid-semester (roughly a month from now): All programs update learning outcomes if warranted; create or update assessment plans for all program learning outcomes; and design or update assessments (such as prompts for capstone assignments and rubrics to assess them). For general education, design or update assessments where it makes sense to collect baseline data from students' initial general education courses.
 - b. By the end of the Fall semester, implement as many program assessments as possible with either Fall 2018 capstone assignments or retroactively with Spring 2018 student work saved in your learning management system.
 - c. By early January 2019, summarize program and gen ed assessment results to date, share and discuss them and, where appropriate, identify possible modifications to curricula, teaching methods, and/or resource allocations based on the results.
 - d. By March 1, 2019, submit your report to Middle States.
2. Push everyone to implement as much assessment as possible by the end of the Spring 2019 semester. Under this schedule, your March 1 report to Middle States will consist mostly of unimplemented assessment plans, with a few examples of completed assessments for a few program learning outcomes. While again I cannot predict any Commission action, I think that under this schedule chances are good that the Commission would keep Kutztown on warning in June and ask for another report in Fall 2019. This schedule would give you your best shot at getting off warning in Fall 2019. It would also enable you to start addressing any shortcomings in student learning a year from now. This schedule would be:
 - a. By the end of the Fall semester: All programs update learning outcomes if warranted, and create or update assessment plans for all program learning outcomes. The Academic Assessment Council has already asked all programs to do this.
 - b. By the middle of the Spring 2019 semester: All programs and gen ed requirements design or update assessments (such as prompts for capstone assignments and rubrics to assess them) .
 - c. By the end of the Spring 2019 semester, implement the assessments for as many program and gen ed learning outcomes as possible.

- d. Over the summer, summarize assessment results, share and discuss them and, where appropriate, identify possible modifications to curricula, teaching methods, and/or resource allocations based on the results.
 - e. By the Fall 2019 date specified by the Commission (which might be as early as September 1), submit your report to Middle States.
3. Develop a multi-year assessment plan and implement it on the schedule you have already established, as Dr. Corbett suggested. While again I cannot predict any Commission action (I keep repeating this because it's important to keep in mind), as with Schedule #2 I think chances are good that the Commission would keep Kutztown on warning in June and ask for another report in Fall 2019. Whether you get off warning in Fall 2019 may depend on how much of the plan is implemented. With this approach, there may be shortcomings in student learning that you will not identify or address for several years.

It's up to the Kutztown community to decide which schedule to follow. But I do not recommend Schedule #3 because of the risk of shortchanging student learning for several student cohorts of students. In essence, I don't think Schedule #3 is fair to your students. I also don't like the increased risk of a less-than-positive accreditation decision in Fall 2019, even if that risk may be relatively small.

Ordinarily I would recommend Schedule #1 over Schedule #2 because it's in the best interests of your students (you'll minimize the number of students whose learning should be better) and you have the best shot at getting off warning as quickly as possible and minimizing follow-up reports. And I think the Kutztown community has the capacity to do this. But I don't know the scope of what you all would need to do this semester:

- While most programs have articulated learning outcomes, I don't know how many of those learning outcomes are truly appropriate and how many need to be revisited.
- While many programs have developed assessment plans, I don't know how many of those plans are complete, appropriate, and realistic.
- I don't know how many programs have identified assignments and developed rubrics to assess program learning outcomes.
- I don't know how much help faculty need in creating, updating, and implementing assessment plans. I don't know how many will need workshops and how many will need one-on-one assistance.
- I don't know how many program curricula now effectively address their program learning outcomes and how many curricula need a thorough overhaul.
- I don't know what else is on the Kutztown community's plate this semester and what might be postponed until after the March 1 report is submitted.

So I cannot make a recommendation on which schedule is best for Kutztown.

Preparing the March 1 Report

No matter which schedule you choose, it will be important that the March 1 report include the following:

1. A chart summarizing where every program and every gen ed requirement is regarding student learning assessment. Has each articulated its learning outcomes? Created a complete assessment plan? Developed the assignments, rubrics, and/or test questions that will be used to

assess each learning outcome? Implemented the plan? Summarized the results? Used the results to inform any decisions?

2. For programs and gen ed requirements that have completed at least one assessment, a chart summarizing what they've done. For each program or gen ed requirement, list one learning outcome that's been assessed. Summarize the assessment results, compare them against a benchmark and, if they fall short of the benchmark, state what's being done to try to improve student learning.
3. Candid, forthright analysis of what you're doing well, what hasn't gone well or on schedule, and what you're doing to address problem areas. Pages 99-103 of *Assessing Student Learning* can help guide this analysis.
4. Information on concrete steps Kutztown is taking to ensure that assessment is a sustained part of university life: that Kutztown is developing a culture of evidence-informed decision making and a pervasive commitment to improvement rather than satisfaction with the status quo.
5. Appendices with brief (one-page) but complete and thorough assessment plans for every learning outcome for every program (including graduate programs) and every gen ed requirement. It would be a good idea to make rubrics available, so the team can spot-check that the rubrics do indeed appear to assess key learning outcomes.
6. For programs and gen ed requirements that have completed assessments, appendices with brief (one-page) reports on results and results-informed actions for each learning outcome that's been assessed. (The chart I've described in #2 above would be developed using one example from each report.)

For more suggestions on preparing the report, see Chapter 19 of *Five Dimensions of Quality*.

Building a Culture of Assessment and Improvement

A frequent topic of conversation during my visit was how Kutztown can get more faculty engaged with assessment. The key is to figure out why there is foot-dragging and address those root causes. Unfortunately, during my visit I heard inconsistent reasons why there's been foot dragging. One group, for example, mentioned that some faculty are fearful that poor assessment results will adversely impact their faculty evaluations, while another group felt this is not a factor at Kutztown.

So your first step is to **arrive at a clearer sense of why there's been foot dragging**. Perhaps a brief faculty survey or a couple of focus groups might be helpful (evidence-informed decision-making!). Then use Chapters 9-14 of *Assessing Student Learning* to identify strategies to address those root causes.

That said, there seemed to be a consensus that **faculty professional development resources might be deployed more wisely and perhaps increased**. A bigger investment in Kutztown's teaching-learning center might be a good idea, although I note that if professional development resources are increased, something else must inevitably be cut, so I leave this to you all to decide. Assessment committees can note the most pervasive shortcomings in assessment plans. Perhaps, for example, faculty struggle to create learning activities that help students achieve program learning outcomes. The committees can then recommend professional development to address those shortcomings. Once reports of assessment results come in, assessment committees can note the most pervasive shortcomings in student learning and recommend appropriate action. They might note, for example, that several programs report that students have unsatisfactory data interpretation skills, and they might recommend professional development to help faculty learn how to teach these skills across disciplines.

Another strategy that many colleges have found helpful is to ***create a fund of modest stipends that faculty can apply for to address disappointing assessment results***. The key is that these funds are only available to those with disappointing assessment results.

Because everyone is clearly stretched thin, it will be helpful to ***clear off everyone's plates*** as much as possible for the rest of this academic year, to free up time to get assessment going. Identify anything that might be postponed until 2019-2020.

If Kutztown is not already doing this, ***require all proposals for new or revised courses and programs*** to include the key learning outcomes of the experience and explicit, detailed information on each of those learning outcomes will be assessed.

Finally, consider taking a hard look at Kutztown's ***criteria for promotion and tenure*** (P&T). Because Kutztown is a teaching university, teaching excellence should be foremost among P&T criteria, and the University's definition of teaching excellence should emphasize using evidence (including assessment evidence) to understand and improve one's teaching. See pages 178-181 of *Assessing Student Learning* for a more substantial discussion of this. Obviously this cannot be accomplished quickly or easily. Consider postponing consideration of this idea until after Kutztown gets off warning...but perhaps note in your monitoring report that it will be under consideration.

Building a Sustainable Process

There are two keys to building a sustainable assessment process: make it as useful as possible and as simple as possible.

To keep assessment work ***useful***, I suggest:

- Encourage everyone to identify and assess learning outcomes that they truly think are important, even if they may be challenging to assess.
- Factor needs identified through assessment results into resource allocation decisions, and announce those decisions. Once faculty hear that a department got funding for lab equipment because assessment results showed that students need more time practicing lab skills, everyone will be more likely to get on board.
- Once you have baseline results from initial assessments, use those results to develop a meaningful schedule. If results are good, put those assessments on a back burner, assessing them only once every two or three years to make sure results aren't slipping. If results are disappointing, act on them and assess them more quickly, to try to bring student learning up where you want it to be as quickly as possible.

To keep things ***simple***, I suggest:

- Minimize the number of program learning outcomes to perhaps 3-6 per program if possible.
- For academic programs, use program capstone requirements to assess multiple learning outcomes.
- For general education courses, use course capstone assignments to assess multiple learning outcomes.
- For gen ed learning outcomes, apply the Pareto principle or 80-20 rule. Typically 80% of students take only 20% of available gen ed courses to fulfill their gen ed requirements.

- At an appropriate point (perhaps after Kutztown is off warning and the new gen ed curriculum has been implemented for a couple of years), consider consolidating the gen ed learning outcomes. The eight learning outcomes are actually about two dozen, way too many for faculty to teach well or students to learn well in roughly 15 courses:
 1. Communicate clearly and effectively orally.
 2. Communicate clearly and effectively and in writing.
 3. Apply scientific reasoning to solve problems.
 4. Apply scientific reasoning to increase knowledge.
 5. Apply quantitative reasoning to solve problems.
 6. Apply quantitative reasoning to increase knowledge.
 7. Apply skills in critical analysis and reasoning for the interpretation of data.
 8. Engage critically with creative or artistic works.
 9. Demonstrate the ability to retrieve information.
 10. Demonstrate the ability to interpret information.
 11. Demonstrate the ability to evaluate information.
 12. Demonstrate the ability to use information.
 13. Analyze the role of values in local society.
 14. Analyze the role of values in global society.
 15. Analyze the role of ethics in local society.
 16. Analyze the role of ethics in global society.
 17. Analyze the role of diversity in local society.
 18. Analyze the role of diversity in global society.
 19. Analyze the role of multiple perspectives in local society.
 20. Analyze the role of multiple perspectives in global society.
 21. Demonstrate an understanding of various models for the development of the whole person.
 22. Explore concepts from a variety of disciplines.
 23. Explore ideas from a variety of disciplines.
 24. Explore methods from a variety of disciplines.

For more ideas, see Chapters 6 and 26 of *Assessing Student Learning*, which discuss making assessment useful and used, and Chapter 12, which discusses keeping assessment simple.

The Role of the Assessment Committees and Council

There are four things I think it's especially important for the assessment committees and council to do:

- Provide guidelines (not necessarily policy) to faculty on what they are to do and what is considered good assessment practice. See pages 132-133 of *Assessing Student Learning* for more information.
- Offer constructive feedback on assessment plans and reports: what faculty are doing well and how they might improve their assessment practices. A rubric can be very helpful in offering constructive feedback. See pages 134-136 of *Assessing Student Learning* for more information.
- Examine assessment reports for pervasive concerns with student learning and bring those concerns to the attention of appropriate administrators who can help faculty address those pervasive concerns.
- Collaborate and communicate with each other: share what they're doing, what's going well and what they're struggling with.

Chapter 9 of *Assessing Student Learning* offers more suggestions.

Assessing Concentrations and Minors

While Middle States requires only the assessment of academic programs (meaning majors), if the key learning outcomes of concentrations differ significantly from each other, it makes to assess those learning outcomes. Basically, assess whatever will give you useful information.

Middle States also does not require the assessment of minors. In many cases, minors are condensed versions of a major, and assessing the major will give you information you can use to understand and improve the minor. But Kutztown has some minors for which there is no corresponding major. In those cases it would be a good idea, out of concern for those students, to articulate and assess the minor's learning outcomes and assess them. But I would hold off on this until assessments of program learning outcomes and general education learning outcomes are well underway.

A Final Suggestion

Always keep in mind why you're doing this. It's not about meeting a Middle States standard but about understanding and improving student learning so every Kutztown student gets the best possible education.

I hope these suggestions are helpful to you all. Again, I am fully confident that Kutztown has the capacity to develop and implement a useful, sustained process for assessing and improving student learning.