Introduction

Ideally, the process of developing an assessment plan begins with rigorous examination of an institution’s mission statement. The conceptual elements set forth in the mission statement lay the foundation for institutional goals and objectives that shape all the work of the university, from the classroom to the weight room, the boardroom to the lab. Most importantly, though, the mission statement lays the foundation for the institutional assessment plan and sets the criteria against which it is tested.

The task of assessment planning, whether it is done in the Institutional Research office or not, is to build a culture of assessment that is evident in every part of the university community. There are two good reasons for this: to prompt change and improvement where needed, and to serve beautifully as concrete evidence of successful adherence to assessment standards set by accrediting agencies.

Objective

The primary objective of this paper is to describe the role of one institutional research office in a venture to build an institutional assessment plan and revise the mission statement at the same time, activities so closely linked that one cannot proceed absent the other. This will help institutional researchers envision their own role and responsibility in supporting and promoting ongoing assessment activity throughout the university, and help them ensure that a link back to the institution’s mission, goals, and objectives is preserved.

Building a Culture of Assessment

History of Assessment Planning

Outcomes assessment at Marywood University, a small private university in northeastern Pennsylvania, became a campus-wide endeavor as the 1996 Middle States Accreditation (MSA) visit came ever closer. At that time, the MSA standards called for a campus-level coordinating body with oversight responsibility for learning outcomes
assessment. The membership of the initial Outcomes Assessment Group (OAG) consisted of the deans of the four schools, a faculty member from each school, a representative from each of the four vice-presidential areas, the enrollment management administrator, and the assistant to the president for planning and research as chair.

The OAG met for the first time in March 1996, without a clear mandate other than to document outcomes assessment activities currently in place on campus. Although the OAG met once a semester thereafter, little progress was made except for a modest list of learning outcomes measures from departments and programs which, for the most part, had external accrediting visits that required documentation of learning outcomes. Examples of external criteria, or direct evidence, for measuring learning outcomes included the results of licensure examinations for education, nursing, dietetics, and the like. Other departments such as Social Work, Art, Speech Pathology, Music and Business required written evidence of learning outcomes assessment as part of reports to the accrediting body.

The IR office collected and organized the data about learning outcomes assessment, summarized it and reported back to the OAG each year. In addition, indirect evidence of student satisfaction based on data from surveys conducted by IR such as the annual senior survey and the campus diversity survey were shared with the OAG. Reports from other areas of the university such as career services’ employment report, university advancement’s capital campaign updates and enrollment management reports were listed as evidence of institutional effectiveness.

In 1998-99, the OAG assisted in the selection of the quadrennial student satisfaction survey administered in the fall of 1999. The results of that satisfaction survey were presented to several campus groups following data analysis. Over the next year, some IR staff members attended workshops on assessment at professional meetings such as NEAIR and SCUP, notably pre-conference workshops by Fred Volkwein of The Pennsylvania State University. Although faculty members on the committee endorsed the idea of bringing in an assessment consultant to provide professional development for faculty members, a time and resources could not be identified to make it happen.

In 2000-01, as the MSA Periodic Review Report (PRR) loomed on the horizon, the focus on outcomes assessment intensified. A written report detailing current outcomes assessment was submitted as part of the PRR, yet there was little buy-in from the faculty as a group or departments that had no external body requiring outcomes assessment. Very modest progress had been made toward creating a culture of assessment on campus despite the five-year history of the OAG. All this was about to change.

**Impetus for Change**

The most important factor in changing the climate of outcomes assessment at Marywood University was leadership and support from the highest administrative level. It began in the summer of 2001. Prior to the start of the 2001-02 academic year, Marywood University’s president mandated that a draft of an institutional outcomes assessment plan be written and submitted to her by June 2002. One of the first steps was to make the Outcomes Assessment Group a university standing committee, the Outcomes Assessment Committee (OAC), reporting directly to her and coordinated by the staff of planning and institutional research.
The responsibility for writing the policy and procedures for the OAC fell to the head of planning and institutional research. As a university standing committee, the purpose, membership, and reporting lines of the Outcomes Assessment Committee had to be submitted to the Committee on Committees and then to the university policy committee for approval. The purpose of the OAC was to advise the president on issues related to outcomes assessment including recommendations about resources needed to support the process, and to coordinate the process of developing the campus outcomes assessment plan.

Unlike some institutions, Marywood University’s definition of outcomes assessment included more than just student learning outcomes; it also included evidence of institutional effectiveness. As a result, the OAC membership included representatives from all areas of the university, including business affairs, university advancement, student life, academic support areas and all academic units. All academic deans are committee members as is the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs - Enrollment Management. The Director of Human Resources represented business affairs, the Assistant Vice President for Development represented University Advancement, and the Director of Career Services represented Student Life. Three faculty members were appointed by their respective deans. All vice presidents were ex officio members of the committee. Figure 1 shows the relation between the Office of Planning and Institutional Research and the Outcomes Assessment Committee. A comment on the role of Institutional Research in assessment is necessary to fully understand how the process worked at Marywood.

At Marywood University, planning and institutional research functions are integrated as a single department (P&IR) reporting to the president. As such, the P&IR office tracks all institutional data and has an institutional focus that is also linked to strategic planning. Not only does this office coordinate all institution-wide surveys and prepare reports, it tracks benchmarks on progress towards the strategic goals. The IR staff also responds to data requests from other senior administrators, prepares reports on faculty productivity, maintains a password-protected EIS (Executive Information System) for different levels of administrators, and a website on the campus intranet for disseminating information to faculty and staff.

Because of the position of planning and institutional research within the institution and staff expertise in measurement, it seemed logical to give the IR office the responsibility for coordination of outcomes assessment. Not every IR office reports to a
president, nor does an IR staff necessarily have the requisite background to lead others in
developing an assessment plan. IR professionals have more experience in assessment
than most other campus units. By recognizing that the surveys managed by IR often
produce indirect self-reported evidence of student learning outcomes, IR serves an
important role in contributing to an overall institutional assessment plan.

Year One Activities

The president’s mandate to produce a written draft of an assessment plan by June
2002 was accompanied by financial resources to assist professional development of OAC
members. Funds were provided by the president. One dean and the head of P&IR
attended a pre-conference workshop and Assessment Conference held in Indianapolis in
November 2001. IR staff attended workshops (Volkwein, 2001), as well. The conference
attendees gathered a wealth of information about assessment including vendor
information about commercial resources such as TrakData, possible consultants to assist
faculty in developing assessment plans, assessment newsletters, websites and many
examples of assessment models, instruments and plans. Many of the conference attendees
and presenters were senior faculty members who hold leadership roles in assessment
planning. At Marywood, however, no clear faculty leader had been identified at that time.

Attendance at two MSA assessment conferences during the fall of 2001 were also
funded to help committee members understand what was required as part of an outcomes
assessment plan. The fall undergraduate faculty forum at Marywood was devoted to a
presentation on the new MSA standards on outcomes assessment. Meetings were held in
each vice-presidential area to discuss assessment plans. The chair of the OAC was
invited to several of these area meetings to help departments define exactly what
assessment meant for the area. In some instances, the Continuous Quality Improvement
(CQI) process was identified as the appropriate model for thinking about their unit’s role
in assessing institutional effectiveness. By late fall, the deans had decided that they
would be the assessment leaders for their schools, rather than appointing a faculty
member as the campus leader for assessment of learning outcomes. Each dean had the
group of department chairs work on assessment planning for programs and departments.

While the year-end goal was to have a draft of an outcomes assessment plan, the
process was divided into four stages that would take place over two years, in order to
avoid unnecessary rewriting. The first stage, introduced in that fall of 2001, would be to
complete the inventory of existing OA activities in each unit and place these in context
by introducing a model for an assessment plan. The second stage would add information
about the timetable for implementation, products and dissemination of assessment results,
completing another part of the model. In the third stage, at the start of fall 2002, goals
and objectives would be written for each unit. In the fourth stage, evidence of actions and
feedback from the assessment process would be added to the plan. A brief digression to
explain why the staging was necessary for Marywood University follows below.

A Concurrent Restructuring of Academic Affairs

Marywood University was in the process of restructuring academic affairs from
schools into colleges as the assessment planning process began in earnest in 2001. A year
later, decisions had been made about which departments and programs would be aligned in the four new colleges. The plan was that by June 2003, restructuring would be formalized.

The 2002-03 academic year was a transition year between the old and new structures, and unit goals and objectives linked to institutional goals and objectives were not yet set down. This held up the assessment planning process, because asking faculty and administrators of the former schools to develop new school goals and objectives did not make sense. So, the logical first step of deciding on goals and objectives for the assessment plan was delayed until the faculty was working together on the missions, policies and procedures for the new colleges during the 2002-03 transition year.

A second important reason for the delay was the ongoing mission review process. The timing of the request to write unit goals and objectives was critical because a campus-wide committee chaired by the president was in the process of reviewing the mission and derived institutional goals and objectives. Without a clear consensus about institutional goals and objectives, school/college goals and objectives would be difficult to develop without rewriting. The work of the mission review committee is described below.

**The Mission Review Process**

As the form and function of outcomes assessment on campus was gaining definition during that first year of committee action, our mission statement was set to undergo change, as well. It had become clear to the President, who sits on the MSA Board, that our stated mission needed revision in order to better reflect the university we had become during more than a decade of stunning advancement and renewal since 1990. She established the Mission Review Committee in Fall 2001 to undertake that task.

The previous year the campus had participated in a SWOT analysis as part of strategic planning, and also had developed a consensus about the core values of the university. Committee work began by considering the adequacy of the current mission to meet the criteria for a mission set out by new MSA standards. Several articles on what a mission should be, as well as examples of mission statements from similar institutions were examined. Lively discussions centered on major changes at Marywood since the last mission review, and whether the current mission adequately reflected the changed institution. For example, since the last mission review, Marywood had become fully coeducational, strengthened sports and athletics, attained university status and inaugurated two doctoral programs.

Membership on the Mission Review Committee included faculty from a variety of disciplines, the undergraduate and graduate deans, and administrators from university advancement, planning and research, and business affairs. A strategy for conducting the mission review was loosely based on a model described on the Meeting Facilitators International web page (Withrow, 2002). Committee members then determined that a strong mission statement would develop from five **assumptions**, and needed to address five questions, or **query items**:
### A Model for Mission Review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Query Items</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answers the query items</td>
<td>Who we are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses our primary audiences</td>
<td>Who we serve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connects and reflects core values</td>
<td>What we do for them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is succinct</td>
<td>How we do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoids redundancy</td>
<td>Our uniqueness</td>
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The small but earnest group of committee members set down some initial responses to the queries, but it soon became apparent that broad-based input would inform the document most eloquently. One characteristic about Marywood University that is unique is a history of collegial engagement in issues important to the operation of the institution, and our president continues to be true to that legacy. As a consequence, staff of the Office of Planning and Institutional Research was called on to conduct a qualitative study consisting of focus group research on mission, using a cross-section of campus representatives.

The interviews were conducted over a month-long period in the spring semester. Members of the Mission Review Committee were recruited to lead individual focus groups. Instructions and work sheets for leaders and group members were created in order to help the participants engage more fully in the discussion and ensure that responses were elicited, at least loosely, by query categories. Focus group discussions were taped and later transcribed by institutional research staff.

Text of the transcriptions from each focus group was combed for raw responses, listed and later grouped by query item. Common phrases and themes that emerged from the text were set down and then submitted to the Mission Review Committee for discussion. These phrases and themes will augment and enrich the expression of mission that the committee eventually crafts and shares with the university community.

**Goals and Objectives Developed**

Late in spring 2002, the current institutional goals were revised and rewritten to better reflect the revised mission. Feedback from campus leaders resulted in a second revision to the draft of goals and objectives in early fall. By mid-fall the draft of the core values, proposed mission, goals and objectives was disseminated to all areas of the campus for review, discussion and comment. A writing committee was formed to review and consolidate all comments from discussion groups.

As this was going on, early steps to develop the assessment plan, such as creating an inventory and finding models to guide our work, were proceeding simultaneously. The relation between the mission review process and assessment planning stages are shown in the schematic in Figure 5.

**Developing the Assessment Plan**

As noted above, completing the assessment inventory was the first task assigned to each campus unit. Background articles like the one on MSA standards by George
Santiago, Jr. (2001) in Assessment Update were distributed to OAC members, and models like one from The University of St. Thomas (1999) were introduced to help give structure to the task of developing an assessment plan. One very helpful assessment model was provided by Trudy Banta, Vice Chancellor for Planning and Institutional Improvement at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, and Editor of Assessment Update. Her “Planning for Learning and Assessment” questions are shown in Figure 2.

**PLANNING FOR LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT**  
T. Banta (2002)

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What general outcome are you seeking?</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How would you know it? (the outcome) if you saw it? (What will the student know or be able to do?)</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>How will you help students learn it? (in class or out of class)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using this model as a foundation, we developed our own, one that would be useful for making a general inventory of activities for institutional assessment overall, not just student learning outcomes. Our Marywood “Assessment 5-Year Report” is shown in Figure 3.

**ASSESSMENT 5-YEAR REPORT FOR 0000 - 0000**  
(Marywood University, 2002)

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Intended Outcome or Objective of the Major or Program</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Assessment Method</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>To Whom /When</td>
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Units or departments with an existing assessment plan did not have to rewrite to conform to the model as long as all relevant information was included. The office of institutional research provided an example of information to include as part of current assessment activities. Stage one of unit plans were due in March 2002, when each area would report back to the committee.

The second stage involved completing information about what was produced as a result of the assessment and to whom these results were disseminated. For example, the senior survey results are distributed in a report produced every other fall with data posted
to the Marywood intranet, a complete report to the cabinet and summary presentations to the faculty and other administrative units. At the spring OAC meeting, information about the new MSA standards was distributed, along with pertinent articles from *Assessment Update*. A template of a budget summary spreadsheet was distributed to help track unit resources devoted to assessment. Planning began for a consultant visit for academic affairs in the fall. Unit assessment plans with stage one and two completed were due by June 1, 2002. In reality, assessment plans were all turned in by the end of the summer.

The third stage (planned for fall 2002) of developing the assessment plans required each unit to write unit goals and objectives that were *linked to institutional goals and objectives*. Note that institutional goals and objectives are not the same as strategic goals and objectives.

Strategic goals and objectives derive from institutional goals and objectives. Because strategic goals may change from one planning cycle to the next, they can be viewed as aspects of the institutional goals that receive greater attention or emphasis for a short period of time in response to external events and conditions. MSA standards require a clear link between the mission statement and institutional goals and objectives as well as links between the institutional and unit goals and objectives.

### Year Two Activities

Now, in year two of this venture at Marywood, an assessment consultant has already presented to faculty members and department chairs. His day-long consultancy also involved working with student life administrators answering questions about their role in contributing to student learning outcomes. Staff in business affairs attended an EACUBO meeting and identified an expert in assessment who described how she had managed the assessment process for fiscal affairs. She will serve as a consultant to the departments in business affairs as the year progresses. University advancement and student life have also been offered the services of a consultant in their respective areas to help with assessment.

A draft of the *institutional* goals and objectives was distributed to members of the OAC at the fall meeting. The primary goal for assessment planning during the second year is to write goals and objectives for each department or unit and then determine if current assessment activities are adequate. Once the preliminary unit goals and objectives are written, each unit will then evaluate their current assessment activities in light of them. Information based on assessment activities should enable the department or unit to determine if goals have been achieved or if changes are necessary.

A culture of assessment results in a continuous process of setting goals, measuring whether progress has been made or a goal achieved, making changes and then assessing whether the change has been effective in moving the unit closer to achieving its goals. The data from an assessment should provide information to help support decisions about changes needed to progress towards a goal. So, the last stage of developing assessment plans is to identify whether additional assessment measures are necessary, what the cost is for the assessments and when they will be administered. For some departments, evidence of improvements resulting from prior assessment activities will complete the plan.
As an example, an institution may have a goal of providing a challenging educational environment for its students. One possible method to assess progress towards the goal is the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) benchmark called Level of Academic Challenge. The data from the NSSE is compared to both what might be expected of students at a given institution as well as compared to other institutions nationally from the same group. The Level of Academic Challenge benchmark is made up of several items asked of both seniors and first year students about class experiences such as the number and length of papers, class presentations, being asked to work harder than they thought they were capable of doing, etc. By examining the student responses to the individual items, feedback about a student’s total educational experience can provide faculty with directions for curricular changes. A second administration of the NSSE can then provide evidence of whether the changes have had the desired effect.

An Ongoing Venture

In recent years, efforts to establish ongoing assessment have become more ardent in academe, and standards written by the Middle States Association have called ever more forcefully for a link between assessment and mission, goals and objectives. Marywood University is now engaged in a two-year venture to respond to these pressures, and an assessment plan based on a strong mission statement will be soundly in place by the close of this academic year. The finished plan, drawn from all quarters of the university, and involving faculty members, staff and administrators, will be solid evidence of the link between assessment and mission.

A culture of assessment is being bred at Marywood University. It will support an ongoing cycle of setting goals, measuring progress, making change, and evaluating the effectiveness of that change in achieving institutional goals. The most important role we play in institutional research is to help establish a process of assessment that promotes “overall institutional improvement” (MSA 2002), a process that continues for the life of the university.
Building a Culture of Assessment

Outcomes Assessment Plan Development

Inventory of Existing Activities

Models for Structure

Qualitative Study

Revised Mission Statement

Institutional Goals and Objectives

Unit Goals and Objectives Developed

Evaluate existing outcomes assessment activities against goals to determine whether more outcomes assessment is needed

Assessment Plan by Units

include goals and objectives, current and proposed activities, recommended changes; future: coordination, implementation, evaluation

Figure 5
REFERENCES


Assessment Web Sites

http://lsv.uky.edu/archives/assess.html
The oral history of the ASSESS listserv and instructions for subscribing are here.
http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/inst_research/
A library of assessment resources available on web and summary of “best practices.”
North Carolina State University: undergraduate assessment plans, models; also, information on their Undergraduate Assessment Symposium April 7-8, 2003 in Raleigh.
http://www.uncwil.edu/stulife/
University of North Carolina at Wilmington has this site for student life assessment.
http://web.umr.edu/~assess/other/instass.html
A list compiled by the University of Missouri, Rolla of assessment pages at more than 15 universities. Missouri’s site also features their own model for Co-curricular Assessment of Skills and Education (C.A.S.E.)
http://cortland.edu/oir/assmntpage.html
SUNY Cortland assessment activities
http://pages.towson.edu/assessment/towson_assessment_activities.htm
Assessment reports (plans plus results) for Towson’s Chemistry, Environmental Science & Studies, and Theatre programs.