

Program Assessment at the University of Missouri

Background: The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is the accreditation body for colleges and universities in the central U.S. In 2010, MU was invited to pilot a new model of continued accreditation, one grounded in a philosophical shift away from satisfaction with basic requirements to a culture of “aspiration and continual improvement.” This pilot program required that MU undertake a major improvement initiative designed to address present concerns or goals. MU chose to focus on the program assessment (PA) process because the current process tended to lead to summaries of past achievements and requests for additional resources; it did not generally lead to improvement.

New Program Assessment Process: The new process has two distinct parts. Part I is an assessment of the unit’s research and creative activity, teaching and learning, service, and economic development. Additionally, Institutional Research (IR) provides programs with internally generated data as well as two comparative data sources, Academic Analytics (allows for benchmarking against other like institutions regarding faculty research productivity) and the Delaware Study (provides a comparative analysis of teaching loads, instructional costs at the level of the academic discipline). These data should be used as a tool to assist programs in identifying their strengths and areas where improvements would advance the overall effectiveness of the program and the program’s contributions to the University. Based on the findings in Part I, Part II should be a description of the unit’s plans for the next 3-5 years, identifying specific issues, problems, or concerns that the plan seeks to address. Approximately 20% of programs go through the assessment process yearly.

Support is provided to the programs by the Faculty Fellow (FF) for Program Assessment who provides general guidance and feedback to the programs; the Director of Assessment (DA) who assists programs with articulating their learning objectives; the Associate Director of Quality Improvement (ADQI) who helps programs identify, set, and reach improvement goals; and the Vice Provost for IR and Quality Improvement (VP) who serves as a resource of assistance in interpreting data (see figure for entire process).

Early Lessons Learned – Process: 1) Initially, no template was provided to programs/departments, but it quickly became obvious that one was needed. 2) The ADQI came on board in May of 2012, nearly the end of the first year. That role in the process needed to be defined and solidified. 3) The PA team wanted to use the assessment to help identify university-wide opportunities. Assessments are often written by the chair/director or a small committee who may capture processes or trends impacting them, but not those affecting all faculty. 4) After the initial year, the PA team understood that we were learning about opportunities for improvement with the PA process anecdotally, so a formal process for assessing the new PA process needed to be developed. **Early Lessons Learned – Changing Culture:** 5) Some programs can find the word “improvement” offensive.” An expressed sentiment was that programs and faculty are working as hard as they can – improvement is impossible. 6) These data provided from Academic Analytics were overwhelming and sometimes intimidating. Benchmarking against other like institutions is not a standard practice at MU and in some cases, these data were not favorable. The response was to explain these data away (47% of programs did this), not to use it to identify areas of improvement.

Adjustments and Planned Changes: 1) A template has been developed that covers all sections of the PA process and provides guidelines on what can be included. 2) At what points in the process the ADQI should be engaged was defined and agreed upon by the PA team (see figure). New uses for the ADQI continue to emerge. 3) The PA team will develop a survey to administer to all faculty whose program is preparing for the assessment in order to capture a broader sense of campus-wide opportunities. 4) A survey will be disseminated to programs who have completed the process to determine the strengths and opportunities for improvement for the overall process. 5) The PA team discusses improvement in the context of assessment – that faculty do constant assessment in order to improve their lectures, assignments, etc. “Improvement” is also discussed as a continuum from “this really needs fixing” to “we do this well, could we be better?” 6) Programs now meet separately with the VP to discuss these data rather than in the introductory meeting with the entire PA team. Additional techniques for shifting MU to a culture of improvement need to be identified.

For instance, all programs have some practice or practices that are exemplary. MU has plans to start a university-wide event where these types of practices can be shared. We believe this will aid in shifting MU to a culture of improvement.

