THE BIG PICTURE
Institutional Effectiveness and the Culture of Assessment

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Over the past two Symposium years, we’ve talked about building and maintaining the Culture of Assessment and about the collaboration around assessments that occur within a strong, viable campuswide Culture of Assessment. We’ve talked mainly about student learning assessment within this professional framework. Today we will talk about the “Big Picture”—the meaning of Institutional Effectiveness (IE), and how the Culture of Assessment facilitates an effective institution and provides the framework for evaluation of IE. Our students and the College Mission are at the center of the picture.

Defining Institutional Effectiveness

“An institution of higher education is a community dedicated to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, to the study and clarification of values, and to the advancement of the society it serves. Accreditation is the means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community. Middle States’ accreditation is an expression of confidence in an institution’s mission and goals, its performance, and its resources.”

The above quote is taken from the Middle States publication, Characteristics of Excellence.1 There are some important words to note within this text, words that are essential to understanding the accreditation process that periodically confirms the effectiveness of an institution.

The first of these words is community, which is used as an essential descriptor for institutions of higher education and, by extension, describes an important global quality of institutional culture. Next, the words self-regulation and peer review denote the nature of the accreditation process as one engaged in by the higher education community as a whole. By mutual consent the process constitutes peer assessment of member institutions, using agreed-upon standards of the educational community, in order to ensure the quality of member institutions and the higher education enterprise as a whole. This translates into institutional accreditation as the ongoing public acknowledgement and affirmation of institutional quality.

Accreditation, therefore, is a process in which we engage as a community in order to self-assess, ensure and receive public acknowledgement (from our peers) that we are providing our students with a quality education. This is the heart of our mission and the center of all of our activities in the classroom and in every campus office. This is the foundation of our shared effort.

1 For more information on Middle States Standards and expectations, go to http://www.msche.org/.
The obvious next question is, “How does Middle States define Institutional Effectiveness?” Though Middle States has many requirements for accreditation, there are three basic expectations by which an institution demonstrates its effectiveness. These are:

- Mission fulfillment
- An institutional “Culture of Assessment”
- Compliance with the 14 Middle States Standards

In short, an effective institution is one that fulfills its mission, which always includes providing students with quality learning experiences. An effective institution fulfills its mission through an institutional Culture of Assessment, meaning we fulfill our mission by careful planning for the collection and use of assessment data across the institution, and that we do this systematically and in a sustained, not episodic, way. Finally, an effective institution demonstrates ongoing compliance with the Middle States Standards, which address all aspects of institutional function and resources and are grouped into two large areas: Institutional Context (Standards 1-7) and Educational Effectiveness (Standards 8-14).

The language and the substance of the Middle States Standards are what we must embrace because, taken together, demonstrated full compliance with the 14 Standards demonstrates institutional “health and well-being” which translates to institutional effectiveness and quality, which results in continuing accreditation.

Evidence of an Institutional Culture of Assessment

Linkages among all of the Middle States Standards are essential but the connections among Standards 2, 7 & 14 are especially important in order to demonstrate and sustain the Culture of Assessment. The heart of those linkages is the collection and use of assessment data to assess our institution and its effectiveness.

These are brief descriptions of the three Middle States Standards:

**Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal**

An institution conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission and goals, develops objectives to achieve them, and utilizes the results of its assessment activities for institutional renewal. Implementation and subsequent evaluation of the success of the strategic plan and resource allocation support the development and change necessary to improve and to maintain institutional quality.

**Standard 7: Institutional Assessment**

The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards.
Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

*Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.*

In order to achieve continuing accreditation, institutions must not only demonstrate compliance with these individual Standards but must demonstrate working linkages among them. This means that an institution must demonstrate a Culture of Assessment that focuses on continuous improvement through systematic implementation of strategic planning, informed by institutional and student outcomes assessment data.

We have long talked about Closing the Loop for learning assessment at course level, i.e., using the results of sustained, systematic assessment to inform decisions to modify course content, pedagogy and curricula, followed by re-assessment to evaluate benefits and improved outcomes. In order to achieve and demonstrate Institutional Effectiveness those concepts are translated to a broader framework of department, program, unit and institutional assessment. **The institutional Culture of Assessment requires Closing the Loop at every level, all the time, across all areas and units of the College.**

To accomplish this, we need to ensure that we are collecting and using data in a systematic way to inform planning decisions at the institutional level. These processes must be sustained, explicit and transparent such that everyone has a clear understanding of how we use data to plan and allocate resources; how we assess student learning and the functions of institutional units; and how we Close the Loop to ensure institutional effectiveness.

In addition, we need to build into our planning and assessment processes a high degree of responsibility and accountability, making sure that goals are well-defined and implementation of strategies is clearly tied to those who are designated to do and oversee the work and collect the data.

**Culture of Assessment: Student Learning (Standard 14)**

While closely interrelated, Standards 2, 7 and 14 each have a unique relationship to the Culture of Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness. For Standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning), compliance in practice means that we have in place systematic and sustained assessment of learning at macro, as well as micro, levels and that we consistently use those data to inform strategic planning. It means that we Close the Loop at course, program, and department levels, and that we have established appropriate consistency of outcomes assessment criteria, measurement approaches, evaluation rubrics and institutionalized use of data.

Much of what we need to do to achieve ongoing compliance with Standard 14 can be accomplished by taking what we know (and already do) at the micro, or course level, and translating it to macro levels of learning assessment at program, department and institutional levels. We define program and department level learning goals in the context of the institutional Mission, then use appropriate aggregated course level data to assess the macro goals. It is the
macro learning outcomes that demonstrate Institutional Effectiveness. To reliably demonstrate Institutional Effectiveness we must successfully Close the Loop for student learning assessment. In order to accomplish this we must put in place consistent, systematic and sustained learning assessment practices at all levels.

Culture of Assessment: Institutional Assessment (Standard 7)

For Standard 7 (Institutional Assessment), compliance in practice means that the institution has in place processes not only for assessment of learning but also for the systematic and sustained assessment of functions of academic, administrative, service and support units. These areas provide the support framework within which our students are enabled to learn; therefore it is essential to continuously assess how well the support framework is achieving its goal. As with student learning outcomes data, we collect and analyze institutional assessment data, using the results of our evaluations to improve academic, administrative, service and support services and to inform planning for strategic initiatives.

Institutional assessment includes virtually everything we do toward serving our students and achieving our Mission, and every unit of the College must be aware of its role in achieving our Mission. More than that, each unit needs to have its own culture of assessment, continuously evaluating and improving practices to ensure that we are all serving our students to the highest standards possible in support of their learning. Collection and use of assessment data not directly related to student learning outcomes allows us to identify areas for service improvements, thereby informing the strategic planning process through identification of support areas that may benefit from strategic initiatives. Like learning assessment, this form of assessment is focused directly on student outcomes, not on individual or unit performance evaluation.

Culture of Assessment: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal (Standard 2)

For Standard 2 (Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal), compliance in practice means that at all levels, but especially at the institutional level, we practice systematic and sustained use of assessment data to inform planning and resource allocations. It is not enough to simply collect assessment data; we must use it as a means to institutional renewal, with a focus on continuous improvement through informed strategic planning and resource allocation processes that support the College Mission.

We Close the Loop for this Standard through use of assessment and data analysis not only to plan but also following implementation of strategic planning initiatives, to evaluate the effects of our initiatives. It is not enough to plan and implement; we must assess our strategic initiatives to ensure that the Mission is being well-served by what we do. If the data indicate the Mission is being well-served, we look for ways to further improve upon what was implemented. If the data indicate the Mission is not being well-served, we revise, discontinue or replace initiatives that are not resulting in the positive outcomes.
Getting There: Organization

How will we get from where we are now to where we need to be? How will we ensure not only compliance with all of the Middle States Standards, but that we are truly effective as an institution? The NCC Middle States Taskforce was convened by Dr. Astrab in December 2009. This dedicated group of individuals developed an Institutional Effectiveness model and a timeline for the annual process that implements that model. The graphic below illustrates the planning process model that we are currently implementing, and with which faculty and staff need to be well-acquainted.

While the model appears to include discrete processes unfolding sequentially, in practice this is a single process with components that often overlap in timing. Each component process generally occurs simultaneously with portions of one or more of the other components. This may feel as if it negates the graphical organization, but in fact it reinforces the cyclical and seamless relationships among the component processes. This process has no real beginning or end, just a seamless progression toward Mission fulfillment and Institutional Effectiveness.

You will see this model frequently in the months to come. Notice the timeline dates for each stage and the emphasis on assessment and evaluation that precede (and eventually follow as well) planning and implementation. Essential to the process depicted in this graphic is the framework of “strategic managers” who will manage and oversee the planning process for each department and unit, and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness that will guide and oversee the whole process at the institutional level.
Getting There: Cultural Change

A Culture of Assessment assures Institutional Effectiveness. That is a pretty simple statement and it is also true. In order to achieve a viable Culture of Assessment, however, we must build into our processes some essential elements:

- Transparency, responsibility and accountability
- Collegiality, open communication and shared decision-making
- Collaborative processes, practice and leadership
- Trust, respect and a sense of shared purpose

It might be tempting to dismiss this list as so much jargon. But the truth is that a Culture of Assessment cannot be built on mere compliance with the mandates of some external stakeholder. A Culture of Assessment requires far more than compliance from each of us. It requires an attitude of willing and even cheerful collaboration toward achieving our Mission—providing our students with the best possible learning experience we can and ensuring that we can demonstrate that this is so. In short, we cannot achieve Institutional Effectiveness without the willing and wholehearted efforts and good will of each and every individual. I have confidence that this is within our collective and institutional ability. We have only to decide to do it.