An Introduction to Institutional Assessment

Lehman College
Bronx, New York

August 2010

Institutional Assessment

Standard 7 of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education:

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.

The university/college planning-assessment cycle is comprised of four steps:

1. Developing clearly articulated written statements of key institutional and unit-level goals.
2. Designing objectives or strategies to achieve those goals.
3. Measuring or assessing progress toward those goals.
4. Using the results of that assessment of progress to improve programs and services.

The fundamental question of assessment is:

"As an institutional community, how well are we collectively doing what we say we are doing?" and, in particular, "How do we support student learning, a fundamental aspect of institutional effectiveness."

Middle States does not require a specific approach or methodology to assessment. Instead, it leaves the design and implementation of institutional assessment to each college and university. However, in designing and implementing assessment, colleges and universities are required to satisfy five criteria:

- *Useful:* An effective assessment process helps faculty and staff make appropriate decisions for planning and goal-setting, resource allocation, and improving programs and services.

- *Cost-effective:* The benefits of assessment should exceed the investment made in developing and implementing ongoing assessment.

- ***Reasonably accurate and truthful:*** Assessment should provide reliable information. Such information can be used with confidence. As no single piece of data can define a problem or opportunity, the college should rely on multiple measures in assessing progress toward its goals.

- *Planned:* Assessment processes should purposefully correspond to institutional and unit-level goals.

- ***Organized, systematized, and sustained:*** Assessment is not a one-time activity, nor a periodic activity that coincides with accreditation. Because the environment in which the college operates is dynamic, assessment needs to be continual.

What Middle States Expects of an Institution's Assessment Activities:

- Assessment is documented, organized, and sustained. To satisfy this requirement, the college must have clearly articulated institutional and unit-level goals, systemic and sustained use of multiple assessment measures (qualitative and quantitative) that maximize the use of existing data, are tied to the goals being assessed, and is of sufficient quantity and quality to provide for confidence in decision making.

- Evidence that assessment results are shared and discussed with appropriate constituents and used in institutional planning, resource allocation, and renewal. Assessment results should inform college decision making at the institutional and unit-levels.

- A written institutional plan or plans (including the strategic plan) that reflect consideration of assessment results.

(Adapted from *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*, Philadelphia: Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2006)

Although systematic and ongoing assessment is required by the Middle States Commission, assessment makes good sense from a managerial standpoint. When a college has articulated what it seeks to achieve (its broader goals) and has understanding of how well it is doing (with respect to those goals), it is in a stronger position to make improvements that contribute to its overall performance and student learning results. In general, assessment allows colleges to better prioritize their resources, identify challenges and opportunities earlier than would otherwise be the case, improve their efficiency, and enhance student outcomes, including student learning outcomes that are basic to any institution of higher education, and guide their progress toward their overall mission.

Developing an Assessment Plan

This section will provide guidance on how an administrative unit could proceed with developing an assessment plan. An assessment plan should be developed with the unit's purpose and needs as the foundation.

The Mission Statement:

Each unit should have a clearly-articulated mission statement. The mission statement should be sufficiently broad to full encompass the unit's basic purpose, its core operations, and its vision. The mission statement should provide an enduring foundation of the unit's values on which its decision making is based.

Among the questions the mission statement addresses are:

- Who is the intended market/end user for our services?
- What programs/services are needed to serve that market/end user?
- What image does the unit wish to project to that market/end user?

(Adapted from David Hollowell, Michael F. Middaugh, and Elizabeth Sibolski, *Integrating Higher Education Planning and Assessment: A Practical Guide***, Ann Arbor, Michigan: Society for College and University Planning, 2006)**

One example of a mission statement is the January 2009 mission statement of Lehman College's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs which states, in part:

> *…Lehman College's vision includes increasing sponsored programs, and the related income, in order to serve more effectively as an intellectual, economic, and cultural center within the Bronx… Through their joint ownership of the institutional vision, goals, and processes of Lehman College, the faculty and administration working together can nurture both the culture and the environment for research.*
>
> *Given the mission of a dynamic research environment and the interdependence of environment and culture, the first priority of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs is to consistently, effectively, and energetically engage with its stakeholders, partners, and constituents. This engagement and related communications must occur at every level of the Office's activities and in all interactions with other parts of the institution, but it will be most specifically aided through the establishment of a Research Advisory Board (RAB)…*

(**Source:** http://www.lehman.edu/provost/grants/forms/PDF/3_18_09_Materials.pdf/)

If one examines the relevant portions from the mission statement, one finds answers to the three basic questions:

- Intended market/end user: "Stakeholders, partners, and constituents" in general, and "faculty and administration" in particular.
- Needed programs/services: "Sponsored programs" that generate income.
- Desired image: Effective and energetic engagement, particularly through a Research Advisory Board.

Unit Goals:

Based on the unit's mission, planning goals that outline general policy direction are developed. Those goals are broad in nature. Goal statements from The City University of New York's (CUNY's) Performance Management Report (PMP) of 2008-09 and Lehman College's 2010-2020 Strategic Plan provide some examples of the broad language used to express goals.

> *Excellence in Teaching, Research, and Learning*
>
> *Raise Academic Quality*
>
> *Enhanced Student Success*
>
> *Improve Student Success*
>
> *Enhance Financial and Management Effectiveness*
>
> *Greater Institutional and Financial Effectiveness*
>
> *Commitment to Engagement and Community Service*

Similarly, unit goals should be expressed in broad language that relates to the fundamental mission of the unit.

In general, when it comes to assessment, goals should be expressed with action-oriented verbs. Hence, for purposes of assessment, it would be desirable to express *"Excellence in teaching, research, and learning"* as *"Foster excellence in teaching, research, and learning"* or *"Enhanced student success"* as *"Enhance student success."* Realistically, strategic planning exercises cater to a broader range of interests and constituents and the language is not always tailored for assessment. Units, though, should use action-oriented verbs when defining their goals.

Link the Unit Goals to the Relevant Institutional Goals:

The unit's goals should be anchored or aligned to the College's goals. Therefore, the institutional goals to which the unit's goals are related should be identified. For example,

the college could seek to "Enhance student success." The Registrar could seek to "Provide students with superior service." That unit goal would tied to the College's goal concerning student success, as the Registrar's aim to provide "superior service" would represent a factor that contributes to overall student success.

Unit Objectives:

Each goal should be accompanied by a number of measurable objectives that represent milestones toward achievement or realization of the related goal. Objectives are expressed in more specific language and, to the greatest extent possible, should be measurable. For example, a goal to "Enhance student success" could be pegged to specific admissions criteria, credit accumulation criteria, retention rates, and graduation rates, among other criteria that can be expressed in quantitative or, if necessary, qualitative terms.

Assessment Methods:

A unit should identify the method or methods that will be used to assess its progress with respect to its objectives. In general, the assessment method should provide information that is useful, reliable, and relevant to the objective(s) being measured. Sources of data include current or incoming students, alumni, faculty and staff, employers, other institutions, and professional associations or organizations. Data can be collected from in-house, system-wide, or national surveys, focus groups, or brainstorming.

Outcomes/Targets/Benchmarks:

Each unit should articulate the results that are expected from each outcome. The expected outcomes could be qualitative or quantitative in nature.

There are three general categories of quantitative outcomes: (1) productivity outcomes, (2) efficiency outcomes, and (3) satisfaction outcomes. The first category would entail a level of production e.g., to serve 500 students during a semester. The second category would describe a level of performance per dollar of expenditures e.g., to reduce the overall cost of servicing students to $X per student. The third category would allow end users (faculty, staff, students, or other constituents) to express how well a unit's programs or services met their expectations e.g., 75% of students were very satisfied or satisfied with scheduling appointments with Academic Advising.

Targets define levels of performance that a unit seeks to achieve and/or minimally acceptable levels of performance. Benchmarks tie that unit's level of service to other units within the College or similar units at peer institutions.

Completion and Timeline:

To ensure that the assessment exercise will be completed on a timely basis, the unit's assessment plan should specify the relevant timeline for assessment and identify the person or persons responsible for assessment.

Use of Results:

For assessment to provide value, the information collected should be distributed to relevant decision makers. The unit assessment plan should describe how the information was used/will be used. Documentation concerning the use of information in discussions (minutes or meeting notes), reports making recommendations, or implementation of program/service changes should be furnished.

Resources:

Note:
The hyperlinks for each of the listed resources were current as of the time of the preparation of this guide. Hyperlinks are subject to change.

Middle States Commission:
Website: http://www.msche.org/

Assessing Student Learning and Institutional Effectiveness:
http://www.msche.org/publications/Assessment_Expectations051222081842.pdf

Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education:
http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX06_Aug08REVMarch09.pdf

Range of Commission Actions on Accreditation: http://www.msche.org/documents/P2.3-RangeofActions.doc

Self-Study: Creating a Useful Process & Report:
http://www.msche.org/publications/SelfStudy07070925104848.pdf

Team Visits: Conducting and Hosting an Evaluation Visit:
http://www.msche.org/publications/Team-Visits-2009-FINAL2.pdf

Templates

LEHMAN COLLEGE
Unit Assessment Planning Checklist

Purpose: To help identify a unit's assessment needs

1. What objective are you seeking to assess?
   - Unit productivity/output
   - Level of satisfaction
   - Unit efficiency

2. Why are you conducting the assessment?
   - To enhance management effectiveness/performance
   - To improve quality e.g., reduce error rates
   - To track progress over time

3. From whom will the date be collected?
   - Incoming students
   - Current students
   - Students who stopped- or dropped out
   - Graduating students/recent graduates
   - Alumni
   - Employers
   - Faculty
   - Staff
   - Administrators
   - Parents
   - Other institutions
   - Professional associations/organizations

4. From what sources will the data be gathered?
   - In-house surveys
   - CUNY surveys
   - National surveys
   - Internal unit data (documents, memos, reports, etc.)
   - Focus groups
   - Other _____

5. How will the data be used?
   - To improve programs or services
   - To develop a proposal
   - To improve student outcomes

6. Data collection
   - Regular/recurring
   - One-time (special purpose)

LEHMAN COLLEGE
UNIT ASSESSMENT TEMPLATE

DIRECTIONS - For each unit goal, please complete a separate form. Goals and objectives should relate to the college's mission, strategic plan and any other planning documents in your division.

Department/Unit:	Phone/Ext.:	Date:
Department Head/Assessment Ambassador:	**E-Mail:**	

Attachments:
Unit Mission Statement
Unit Goals
University goal(s) to which the unit's goal(s) and objectives are related
Documents related to the assessment process
Documents related to the use of results

Goal:				
Objectives	**Assessment Methods**	**Targets/Benchmarks**	**Completion / Timeline**	**Use of Results**
• Maximum of five measurable objectives for each goal	•What methods will be used to measure progress toward the objectives? • What data will be used to assess the objectives? • What tools will be used?	• What is the nature of the target/benchmark? • What is the minimally acceptable result? • What is the desired result?	• When will the assessment be completed/when was the assessment completed? • How often is the assessment performed? • By whom?	• How will the results be used? If completed: • Are the results being used to inform decisions? • What issues have been revealed? • How can those issues be addressed/what actions are recommended? • What decisions/changes have been made?
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

LEHMAN COLLEGE
RUBRIC FOR EVALUATING UNIT ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Assessment Elements	Not Developed	Developing	Acceptable	Superior
Unit Mission Statement	Does not exist	The mission statement describes the unit's core purpose or principal activities/functions	The mission statement clearly describes both the unit's core purpose and its principal activities/function	The mission statement clearly describes the unit's core purpose, its principal activities/functions, and acknowledges key stakeholders
Goals	No goals are provided	A general goal has been established	A measurable goal has been clearly articulated	2-3 measurable goals have been clearly articulated
Objectives for each goal	No key objectives are stated	Key objectives are stated, but they are not clear, they do not refer to end results, and do not focus on the institution's mission, strategic plan or recipients/customers of the service	At least two objectives are provided that concern end results and are related to the institution's mission, strategic plan or recipients/customers of the service	3-5 clear objectives are provided that focus on end results and are related to the institution's mission, strategic plan, or recipients/customers of the service
Assessment Methods	Little or no information is provided	Assessment measures are identified for some objectives. They do not necessarily yield clear, accurate information	Assessment measures are clearly articulated for each objective. They match the objectives being measured and produce clear, accurate information	Multiple assessment measures are clearly articulated for each objective. They match the objectives being measured and produce clear, accurate information
Targets/Benchmarks	No targets or benchmarks are provided	Targets and benchmarks are identified for some assessment measures	Each assessment measure has a target or benchmark that establishes a minimum performance standard	Targets and benchmarks have been developed for each measure that describes a minimum level of performance. At least one target is quantifiable.
Use of Assessment Results	There is no evidence that the assessment results are shared, discussed, or used to improve effectiveness	Assessment information is collected but the results are not shared, discussed, or used in a systematic fashion to improve effectiveness	Results are used to modify or improve programs, services, resource allocation, work processes, or assessment strategies	Results are used to improve programs, services, resource allocation, work processes, or assessment strategies. They are used to help establish new performance targets. Positive results are shared with others when applicable.

LEHMAN COLLEGE
Development of Objectives Checklist

Purpose: To guide the development and clear articulation of measurable objectives for each goal

- Each objective is related to Lehman College's mission

- Each objective is related to Lehman College's strategic plan

- Each objective is related to the a Division Plan (if applicable)

- Each objective is tied to a specific unit goal

- Each objective expresses a specific end result anticipated once assessment has been completed

- Each objective concerns the customers, end users or recipients of the unit's services

- Each objective is specific

- Each objective is measurable (productivity/output, satisfaction, efficiency)

LEHMAN COLLEGE
Targeting/Benchmarking Checklist

Purpose: To provide guidance in defining the nature of the targets/benchmarks

- Targets/benchmarks are internal: They compare progress over time

- Targets/benchmarks are external: The unit compares itself to other units within Lehman College or outside of Lehman College, but those units are not involved in the same kind of operations/they do not offer the same kind of services

- Targets/benchmarks are competitive: The unit compares itself with direct competitors at other colleges and universities

- Targets/benchmarks are generic: The unit's targets/benchmarks represent ideal standards or best practices