

Montana Western Assessment Committee
Report to Leadership
December 2013

Executive Summary

The Provost and the leaders of the Faculty Senate at the University of Montana Western (Montana Western) decided in August 2013 to establish an Assessment Committee for the campus. Using a guide written by Barbara E. Walvoord – *Assessment Clear and Simple* (2nd Ed., Jossey-Bass, 2010), key faculty and administrative leaders from across campus developed a charge, a list of members, and a three-year plan for the committee. The committee met first in September 2013 and continues to meet as needed to guide and reinforce a re-energized faculty commitment to assessment of student learning.

Experience One was implemented at Montana Western as a learning model to improve the student learning environment. This student-centered, experiential approach to learning engages students as responsible partners in the learning process. Since switching to the block scheduling that is part of *Experience One*, both student retention and graduation rates have trended upward. Now, the faculty and departments are prepared to demonstrate once again their commitment to improvement of student learning by focusing on refinement of student learning outcomes at the course, department, and institution level. Faculty and staff also have committed to gather both direct and indirect information to routinely and systematically assess learning at Montana Western and to use that information to take actions to improve the student learning environment.

Assessment Activities in 2012-13

- **General Education**

The General Education Committee voted unanimously in Fall Semester 2012 to adopt the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Essential Learning Outcomes as the learning outcomes for General Education at Montana Western. Montana Western already had endorsed the goals and learning outcomes for each of the Montana University System core content areas: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences/History, Mathematics, Communication, Humanities/Fine Arts, and Cultural Diversity. (<http://mus.edu/Transfer/MUScore.asp>)

The committee acknowledged the need for an assessment plan for general education but felt they lacked sufficient expertise and direction to devise a suitable plan. Nonetheless, the committee collected student writing samples from general education courses and worked with the Assistant Provost to try to analyze those samples using an assessment rubric for writing. Several committee members expressed that the exercise felt artificial and was not linked to a clear plan for general education assessment. That feedback led the Provost's office to purchase several copies of *Assessment Clear and Simple* for background and guidance for the committee, department chairs, and others.

- **Program Assessment**

The Assessment Committee provided departments with a paper template for reporting on their department assessments of student learning. Those reports are posted on the Provost's Moodle site. Montana Western's School of Education, Business and Technology already have implemented assessment of learning outcomes as part of their specialized accreditation.

As expected with a new process, reports were uneven. Many departments did not express their learning outcomes in standardized format. Also, many reported on activities undertaken or data gathered but were less specific on action plans. What was more encouraging was the serious participation of all the departments and the faculty discussion within their departmental groups about assessment plans and processes. The Assessment Committee initiated development of an electronic survey that faculty may use to report learning outcomes following a standardized procedure. [A summary of department targeted areas for improvement, action plans, and resource requests is appended to this report.]

- **Student Success**

Student Affairs regularly administers a three-page student feedback survey and a one-page athletic interest survey. Both surveys are administered at the end of fall term. Respondents live primarily on-campus and are first or second year students (82%). Satisfaction with campus environment and services has remained fairly high and consistent from year to year. However, there was a noted drop in the percentage of respondents who reported participation in student activities. This might have been an expression of confusion about the question since only 55% of survey completers answered that specific question. Because student engagement is an important marker for student retention and success, student affairs and student government are working to increase the marketing of activities and will continue to monitor future survey results.

Survey respondents and other students this past year expressed frustration with the speed and coverage of wireless internet services on campus. In response to student concerns and concerns from other campus sectors, the administrative team allocated resources towards upgrade of the residence hall system in fall 2013. Additional wireless upgrades across campus are scheduled for spring 2014.

With the hiring of a new staff person with considerable experience, the career services center last year was able to tailor services to fit better the needs of students who use the center. Changes included the purchase of "Optimal Resume Services" for current students and alumni; utilization of MCIS, MBTI for career explorations; and reinstatement of Wednesday workshops that cover topics related to student retention and career exploration/placement. In response to

feedback from students and prospective employers, the career services center also is in the process of modifying the management of placement files for the education students.

- **Institutional Research**

This last year, Montana Western was able to hire a new director of institutional research (IR) who came with considerable experience in using IR data to support assessment. Institutional Research at Montana Western has been operating at a Tier I Level - Technical and Analytical Intelligence, but hopes to move into Tier II - Issue Intelligence. [Patrick T. Terenzini. "On the Nature of Institutional Research and the Knowledge and Skills it Requires." 1993. *Research in Higher Education* Vol.34, No.1 (Springer)] With the new IR leadership, Montana Western will progress from accessing basic data and information as needed to the regular practice of analyzing, discussing, and using IR data to determine impact and interconnection across the whole campus community. [See IR Plan at (link).]

For 2012-13, IR reports on census, retention, and completion, added to the understanding of the assessment committee. Census for Fall 2013 remained relatively stable at 1364 FTE, down just 2.5% from Fall 2012. Retention of first-time full-time students from Fall 2012 to Fall 2013 also was essentially stable, and the impact of *Experience One* is reflected in the 6-year graduation rate for those seeking bachelor degrees that has increased by 18% since the transition was made in 2005.

Data of concern are the reports of total credit hours at graduation with Montana Western graduates with bachelor degrees averaging 144 hours total credit accumulation. As the IR office helps contribute data for Montana Western's participation in Complete College America, credit accumulation will be monitored more proactively. The goal will be to get students to move forward steadily to obtain needed credits while still helping students refrain from taking unnecessary credits that could increase their costs.

Assessment Activities in Progress (AY 2013-14)

- The Assessment Committee and the General Education Committee are helping to organize local workshops and/or mentoring activities to assist faculty in the writing of clear learning outcomes.
- The Assessment Committee will monitor the mandatory inclusion of learning outcomes in course syllabi and will provide feedback to departments as needed.
- Members of the assessment committee will be available to help departments strengthen their assessment plans and annual assessment reports.
- The Assessment Committee will receive the General Education Committee's report in April 2014.
- The Assessment Committee will review the annual department assessment reports and the minutes from the departments' annual assessment meetings. [Due May 31, 2014]
- The Assessment Committee will review factors contributing to excessive credit accumulation by our graduates and will recommend changes as needed.

- As the entity charged with reporting on student learning assessment to Montana Western's decision makers, the Assessment Committee will synthesize all sources of information relevant to student learning outcomes and will produce an annual report with recommendations for action. That report shall be presented to the Provost and Faculty Senate by October 1st each year.

Recommendations

Based on findings in the departmental assessment reports for 2012 – 2013, the Assessment Committee presents the following recommendations. These recommendations are presented as starting points for program improvements, and should not be viewed as limiting actions. Furthermore, these recommendations span a range of both short-term and long-term approaches. It is not expected that Montana Western would immediately adopt all of these steps. All recommendations should be considered and implemented as institutional resources allow.

1. All undergraduates need explicit instruction in effective reading, writing, and public speaking skills throughout their college careers, in order to master course content and transfer their learning to career and lifetime pursuits. For students who come to the university significantly underprepared in these skills, remediation should be provided.

The committee requests that the university administrative and faculty leadership consider the following actions:

- expand the hours of service for the Montana Western Learning Center, and strengthen tutors' skills in supporting academic reading and writing;
 - develop a system to assess incoming students' reading and writing skills;
 - identify courses across the curriculum that can serve as reading-, writing-, and speech-intensive courses;
 - provide professional development for faculty who teach reading-, writing-, and speech-intensive courses;
 - develop a remedial reading course that can be linked to a variety of reading-intensive courses;
 - hire a faculty member trained in teaching reading to adults.
2. The General Education Committee and the various academic departments need support to continue the work they have begun in developing and maintaining their assessment systems. The Assessment Committee recommends that the university administrative leadership consider hiring a full-time staff member to assist the academic departments (particularly those departments with national accreditation processes already in place) and

the General Education Committee in collecting, aggregating, and analyzing data in an ongoing manner.

3. Experience One at Montana Western is unique in public universities in the United States. As is evidenced in a variety of measures (e.g., high hiring rate for graduates of the education degrees; high number of award-winning faculty; anecdotal reports of the success of graduates pursuing graduate education), it is clear that faculty have developed many effective strategies to ensure student success, many of which are enhanced by block scheduling. Yet faculty members have very little access to funds for professional development or opportunities to collaborate with peers within the institution. Montana Western provides a unique venue for further development of teaching and learning strategies to enhance student success at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Faculty members need access to continuing professional development related to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). The Assessment Committee recommends that the university administrative leadership consider the following actions:
 - provide strong mentoring for faculty new to block scheduling and new to experiential learning strategies;
 - allocate increased funding for ongoing professional development for all faculty to develop skills in experiential teaching, and in both formative and summative assessment;
 - begin the process of developing a Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment at Montana Western;
 - Support faculty research and professional development in SOTL
 - Support departments in their assessment of student learning and in program assessment
 - Provide testing services for exams such as the PRAXIS, GRE, and GED, through the “assessment arm” of the center.
4. External forces (e.g., federal guidelines for financial aid; performance funding initiatives from the MUS Board of Regents) have made it clear that the Montana Western average number of credits to degree completion (144) is too high. The committee recommends that the university administrative leadership consider the following strategy to help decrease this average:
 - Since the advising provided by faculty and student support services both have a significant impact on students’ course selections, the committee recommends that the university develop an improved system of providing advising training to faculty and to staff, to ensure that all have the knowledge base to provide timely and consistent advising to students.