



Assessment Matters

At Montclair State University

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Middle States: *Strengthening the Foundation*

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The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) is a voluntary, non-government, membership association that dedicates itself to quality assurance and improvement through accreditation utilizing peer evaluation. Middle States accreditation instills public confidence in institutional mission, goals, performance, and resources through its rigorous accreditation standards and their enforcement (<http://www.msche.org/>).

The vision of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education acts as a resource for higher education institutions. This vision promotes excellence in achieving institutional mission. It is a voluntary assessment that adheres to high standards for student learning outcomes and operational behavior to make sure that institutions are fulfilling their purposes and addressing issues in a timely and comprehensive manner (<http://www.msche.org/>).

There are core values that center around MSCHE. MSCHE guides itself by:

- Self-regulation and peer-review
- A continuous and seamless relationship with member institutions to promote contin-

uous self-evaluation and institutional improvement

- Respect for the unique mission of each institution and evaluation within that context
- Student learning and effective teaching
- Transparency about the accreditation processes and the status held by each member institution
- Commitment to the principles of cooperation, flexibility, and openness
- Responsiveness to the needs of the higher education community and societal changes
- Consideration of societal and institutional needs through attention to and emphasis on both improvement and compliance.

Regional accreditation will continue to be the focus of higher education. The Middle States Commission is committed to its mission and making sure the members meet the accreditation standards.

Every December MSCHE holds its annual conference that brings together faculty, staff and administrators from colleges and universities of New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Maryland, District of Columbia, U.S. Virgin Islands, Dela-



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ware and Europe. These conferences offer practical ideas and exemplary practices through outstanding plenary speakers, concurrent sessions, and pre-conference workshops.

The 2013 Middle States Annual Conference's theme *MSCHE: Strengthening the Foundation*, reflected the Commission's current efforts to update its accreditation processes and standards. Topics addressed at the conference included assessment issues, the self-study process, new federal regulations, follow-up reporting, substantive change, and others. With increasing demands for greater institutional accountability from government, students, parents, and others, these issues have never been more important.

Montclair State University's Dr. Joanne Coté-Bonanno, Dr. Steve Johnson, and Dr. Ronald Sharps presented a workshop at the Middle States Conference on December 9, 2013, "The PRR: Vehicle for Engaging Faculty and Staff in the Development of a Culture of Evidence". The presentation demonstrated the role of the Periodic Review Report (PRR) in the developing Cultures of Assessment and Evidence at Montclair State. The workshop emphasized that the existing culture of evidence at Montclair State is now being augmented by our assessment activities and reports, such as the PRR to continue to improve our "Culture of Evidence".

The Periodic Review Report (PRR) requires a comprehensive, collaborative, University wide review of Institutional Effectiveness based on the evidence of assessment. The workshop reviewed MSU's assessment of student learn-



ing related to Standard 14, and discussed strategies such as the establishment of the Committee on University Effectiveness (CUE) as a formal standing committee. In addition there were discussions on the Board of Trustees of MSU approved Strategic Plan and Standard 7, Institutional Effectiveness and how each of the eight divisions of the University mapped goals and objectives to the Strategic Plan, developing ongoing assessment plans and collecting data.

Another important strategy for developing a "Culture of Assessment" is that assessment results are formally incorporated into the curricula and course development process. The workshop clearly pointed out the results of the ongoing strategies with a discussion on Montclair States commendations from Middle States. The University was commended for:

- "a robust response to assessment data, a response that reallocated resources to attend to an identified problem and included mechanisms for continuing assessment of success"
- "proactively engaging the challenges and opportunities of technology in all segments of the institution"
- "the comprehensive efforts they have made since 2007 to implement an integrated and univer-

sity-wide system of assessment"

- "the attention they have given to professional development, a crucial support for any comprehensive assessment program"
- "the development of the vision for a systematic, integrated and uniform system of assessment, informing both institutional planning and student learning outcomes." (<http://www.montclair.edu/media/montclair.edu/provost/middlestatesdocuments/2012-PRR-Reviewers-Report-to-MSU-8.1.12-1.pdf>)

The PRR process and reviewers' suggestions and commendations have all empowered the further institutionalization of the cultures of assessment and evidence throughout the University. As we work on "continuing the loop", our 2014-2015 agenda includes the development of a comprehensive set of Planning Dashboards to monitor annual progress being made to achieve Strategic Plan objectives, and procedures for disseminating results. The Provost's Office and Institutional Research are also committed to developing and implementing procedures to assess ongoing faculty and staff support activities and to continue to meet their needs by developing new opportunities.

Middle States New Standards: Town Hall Meeting Overview

The Commission on Higher Education (CHE) for the Middle States Association (MSA) held the Town Hall meeting in Philadelphia, PA on March 27, 2014.

Montclair State University was well represented at the town hall. The meeting was attended by Mary Mallery - Associate Dean for Technical Services at Harry A. Sprague Library, Diana Thomas – Director of the Center for Quantitative Obesity Research and a Professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences, Barbara Ritola - Academic Programs Coordinator and Irina Koroleva – Assessment Coordinator.

The meeting was devoted to reviewing the new condensed draft of the *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* accreditation criteria. Since the range of educational institutions in the region is very diverse, it is hoped that accreditation does not interfere with the individuality of the mission of each institution. The draft is posted online at: <http://www.msche.org/documents/characteristicsdraft120913.pdf>

The writing was shaped by four guiding principles. The revision makes the student learning experience central and this is what drives the document. Additionally, the CHE agreed that the new standards need to be flexible enough to be supportive of innovation.

The current draft, as available today, is a result of five town hall meetings. Four thousand surveys had been sent to major stakeholders prior to crafting the revi-

sions; several hundred comments were received - more feedback received than ever before on any document that had ever been put forward by MSCHE.

The meeting was held in Q&A format. The attendees had an opportunity to ask questions, discuss their concerns and make suggestions on how to improve the document. Attendees expressed concern about a number of issues. Among them:

- **Faculty are not described in a separate section in the document.** The CHE commented that they have worked to describe the role of faculty throughout the document.

- **Library issues dominated the comments from the audience.** A number of librarians spoke up about omissions and voiced their hope that Middle States would recognize the importance of libraries and information literacy and put them back into the *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* document. Mary Mallery from Montclair State also delivered a summary of a letter commenting on the importance of including both the library and information literacy in accreditation standards. Both the ACRL-NJ Chapter President, Gracemary Smulewitz, and the Chair of the VALE Executive Committee, Taras Pavlovsky, signed this letter and sent it to Middle States in comment of the omission of libraries and information literacy in the new draft. The letter is posted on the ACRL-New Jersey Chapter Website at: <http://cus.njla.org/>

[node/541](#). Robert Clark, Professor, STEM and Health Division, Cumberland County College, and MSCHE Commissioner made a point that “it was not a

conscious elimination. The Commission did not see information literacy as a problem”. Clark remarked that there is no argument against including information literacy in the document.

- **Language choice in general.** There is a lot of concern for phrases such as “as appropriate.” This is a term that can allow for perhaps too much bending and not enough regulation. Diana Thomas reported that she was “surprised to learn about language involving “societal expectations” within the standards. The discussion on societal expectations was tied to a desire by policy makers to regulate higher education potentially due to a gap between societal expectations and current higher education goals. The MSCHE is attempting to close this gap through the revised standards. Throughout the meeting the importance of retaining and protecting our current peer evaluation system was underscored.” There were a lot of comments on other concerns from the



Mary Mallery
Associate Dean for
Technical Services,
Harry A. Sprague
Library



Diana Thomas,
Professor, Department of
Mathematical Sciences

higher ed community about the new draft of the *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*, especially on the definition of "societal expectations" in Standard 3, which Commissioners promised to take into consideration while working on the final document.

After the meeting Diana Thomas concluded: "First, faculty need to be involved in understanding,

reviewing, and discussing the draft of the revised standards. Second, we need to consider societal expectations involving higher education and determine how they match our own missions at the department, college and university levels. The

second point is challenging as we value greatly the development and advancement of scholarly work which I am certain faculty would agree play an important role in shaping the future US workforce."

In summary, the Commission on Higher Education for the Middle States Association held the last of its town hall meetings in Albany, New York on April 1, 2014 to discuss the proposed revisions to the standards document, Characteristics of Excellence. A vote from the membership on the new standards will come in the summer/early fall of 2014. There will be a three year roll out. The new standards will not apply to those in the midst of an evaluation the first year. In the second year, unless the institution chooses to use new standards, it can be evaluated according to the old standards. All institutions must comply with the new standards in the third year.

Rubric Workshop is available online at:

<http://www.njvid.net/showvideo.php?pid=njcore:35680>

Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about

(<http://www.montana.edu/wwwprov/assessment/GoodPractice.html>)

Next Issue Highlights:

Assessment Day 2014



References:

<http://www.msche.org/>
<http://www.montana.edu/wwwprov/assessment/GoodPractice.html>