

Lessons Learned

Although a Chinese proverb says “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” most successful journeys actually begin with a plan. Developing the plan for our self-assessment journey was one of the first challenges facing Provost Karen McLean when she arrived at Des Moines University in August 2009.

The beginning of the self-study coincided with the implementation of a new administrative structure. Adding a chief academic officer position created new capacity to standardize assessment and evaluation across the University, develop new norms for professionalism and best practice, and align goals and budgets through a coordinated planning process.

Goal

The first step in our journey was to identify our destination. We approached the accreditation review as an opportunity to determine what we are doing well and what changes need to be made. Our self-study report is intended to be a critical, self-reflective look at how we function as a university. Its evidence and recommendations will become the foundation of our next strategic plan.

We do not expect the report to be definitive as we are currently in the midst of several transformative initiatives: learning to work as one University rather than three separate colleges, moving toward a stronger sense of shared governance and a greater voice for all internal constituencies on critical issues, planning more strategically, balancing our institutional capacity with our mission to educate and serve, and having the tough conversations about diversity and accountability.

Our self-study gives us a way to monitor our progress, recognize changes in our culture, and calibrate the goals for our transformation.

Process

Once our goal was determined, our next step was to choose those most responsible for helping us achieve it. The provost selected the members of the HLC Steering Committee. Each of five subcommittees (one for each criterion) had two co-chairs, one faculty member and one administrator. Members of the subcommittees were chosen by the co-chairs.

Originally, drafts created by the subcommittees were to be submitted to an internal writer.

After that person left the University, we hired an external writing project manager.

Early in the process, the 2001 HLC accreditation report was reviewed. This gave co-chairs a better understanding of the scope of their work and guided their selection of committee members.

At a retreat in November 2009, co-chairs interpreted criteria, analyzed model documents, and benchmarked standards of evidence. They were encouraged to reflect on each criterion and post evidence for any criterion, not just their own.

In the midst of evidence-gathering, eight steering committee members attended the 2010 HLC annual meeting. The sessions on assessment were particularly valuable; in fact, we invited presenters from two sessions to conduct workshops at DMU.

As evidence was reviewed, committees were asked to include solid quantitative support in their drafts. However, in some cases, quantitative evidence was lacking or not readily available. For some topics, such as assessment and community service, qualitative evidence was needed to address the gaps. In addition, we deliberately chose to include vignettes and case studies because they illustrate, in a way that qualitative evidence cannot, the distinctive way DMU meets its standards and lives its mission.

After the committees collected evidence, each produced a draft. Drafts were then compiled into a single document, and each committee was asked to review the quality of its evidence and recommendations. In January 2011, the provost and writing project manager met with each committee to capture members' thinking on these questions:

- Have we covered the relevant issues completely? Is anything missing?
- Is our information accurate?
- Are our evaluations fair and defensible?

- What strengths do we recognize?
- What do we need to fix, and how do we fix it?
- Does anything we discussed need to be addressed in the next strategic plan?
- What are our dreams or recommendations? What is our vision?

The revised draft was then made available to the entire University community for comment. Reviewers were recruited to represent different groups within our community, including faculty, alumni, board members and faculty emeritus. Comments were gathered through SurveyMonkey during a month-long comment window.

In 2011, the president, provost, writing project manager and two faculty assessment champions attended the HLC annual meeting. This reinforced the importance of benchmarking with other institutions and creating faculty engagement.

The system of selecting co-chairs and having co-chairs develop their own working groups proved to be efficient and engaging as we worked on the self-study. This structure has been replicated on the following two major initiatives: 1) the Curriculum Management Applications Task Force (CMAT), which will be making recommendations on a new learning management system as well as software to assist with curriculum mapping, course evaluation, and other assessment efforts, and 2) the Portal Governance Team, which is overseeing and coordinating the migration from the current University portal to a SharePoint platform that will be implemented in December 2011. In each case, the structure has allowed us to collect grassroots input and promote buy-in across campus within a short time.

Our growing ability to develop internal expertise complements our willingness to use outside consultants, such as Daryl Smith, and external research reviewers. We are also engaging more

with other institutions, comparing ourselves to peers and seeking out best practices, especially in assessment and administration.

Strategic implications

As work on the self-study report continued, we became increasingly aware of the link between self-assessment and strategic planning. Many long-standing issues were deliberately not addressed in the current strategic plan. Some, such as diversity, were deferred because we did not believe we could do them justice within the compressed five-month planning schedule. Discussion of others was judged to be too divisive until trust in senior leadership had been rebuilt. (See discussion of the Strategic Planning Process in the Introduction and Core Component 1d.)

As we evaluated areas in which we fell short of our own expectations, we realized that we had done more than we knew to lay a solid foundation for moving forward. Working on Core Component 1b, we were surprised to discover that we had done more to promote diversity than we realized. Significant challenges to becoming a more diverse campus remain, but our recognition of progress and the arrival of our new president, Dr. Angela Franklin, spurred us to make our recommendations to improve diversity more specific and comprehensive.

We also knew that we lacked solid assessment data, as discussed under Criterion Three. However, our self-assessment showed us that best practices, like peer evaluation, are taking root and spreading through faculty advocacy. We are also developing faculty champions who are knowledgeable about assessment and committed to encouraging best practice in their programs and throughout the University.

As committees met with the provost to review their drafts, they were encouraged to think of

their work as preparation for the next strategic planning cycle. Discussions have already begun about the issue of enhancing shared governance. “Encouraging the self-study committees to ask questions and make recommendations is part of the movement toward a greater level of shared governance,” commented Dr. Mclean. “We are giving them a platform to address the issues.” In addition, committees wrote their recommendations for each core component with the next strategic planning cycle in mind.

While attempting to present a comprehensive portrait of our University, we discovered new questions about evaluating performance, ensuring compliance, and enhancing diversity. As Dr. Deavers, Professor Emeritus, noted in his review, “The self-study identifies a number of tough and uncomfortable questions that need to be addressed. I know we don’t have all the answers to these questions, but the fact that we are willing to ask them demonstrates to me that we have a healthier institution than we had previously.”

Community involvement

Throughout the data-gathering process, Dr. McLean encouraged committee members to bring items they would recommend for change or review to a member of the Strategic Planning Team for inclusion in the Strategic Plan that will begin in 2012.

Students were invited to be part of the steering committee when Dr. McLean spoke to the Council of Presidents in late 2009. The group’s consensus was that they wanted to be consulted and updated, but were not interested in serving on a committee. They asked that a representative from the Steering Committee visit the Council periodically to provide updates and ask for input.

Our efforts to be inclusive sparked the realization that we did not have strong channels to collect input from the non-exempt staff. During

information-gathering for the strategic planning process, comments such as “Staff have a lot of knowledge but no one ever asks us” surfaced. In response, two non-exempt staff members were added to the Strategic Planning Team. Their perspective added so much value that a concerted effort has since been made to include staff in all high-level planning processes.

As we review and implement recommendations from the self-study, we expect the staff organization we are establishing to be an important avenue to surface issues and provide feedback. Input from the University community was sought at several stages:

- As committees gathered data
- During the open comment window (March 21–April 21, 2011)
- During review by selected reviewers, including Library Director Larry Marquardt, Board member Art Wittmack, Faculty President Roberta Wattleworth, and outside consultant Michael Hovda.
- During revision of the self-study draft
- At Town Hall meetings
- At faculty and staff meetings, where videos created by the working committees were used to stimulate discussion of the recommendations for each core component

We will continue to seek input as we move forward with our new strategic planning process. Although new recommendations may emerge during the next planning cycle, we believe that this self-study defines our strengths, challenges and hopes as an institution. Planning is an ongoing process driven by vision; this self-study provides a road map for our journey toward becoming one health sciences University doing a world of good.

