

Report on the Condition of Academic Assessment at Minot State University

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Introduction

This report summarizes the condition of academic assessment at Minot State University (MiSU) based on interviews with Department Chairs, engagement in assessment activities at the institution, analysis of assessment-related documentation and other content, and reviews of Yearly Program Assessments (YPA) 2020-2021 reports and 2021-2022 plans. Methods, results, actions, recommendations, and limitations are described. The author of this report began his role as MiSU's Director of Institutional Assessment (DIA) on September 1st, 2021, approximately five months before this report was finalized.

Methods

This section outlines methods of interviewing Department Chairs, engaging with assessment leaders on campus, analyzing internal and external assessment related content, and reviewing YPA reports and plans.

Department Chair Interviews

The DIA conducted one-one-one interviews with the Department Chairs of all but one department at MiSU. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of, as well as recommendations for improvements to, annual program assessment at the institution. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured script, which included the following questions:

- Which attributes of the assessment process seem to be working well?
- Is there anything about the assessment process that is unclear?
- Is there anything about the assessment process that frustrates you?
- Do you have any recommendations for changes to the assessment process?

The DIA jotted notes during the interviews and compiled them in a Microsoft Word document. The interviews were not recorded.

Assessment Leadership Engagement

The DIA engaged with assessment leaders at MiSU in formal and informal ways. Assessment leaders included current and former members of the Academic Assessment and General Education (Gen Ed or GE) Assessment Committees, the former Director of Academic Assessment (DAA), and the Vice President of Academic Affairs (VPAA), among others. Formal ways of engaging with these leaders included participation in Academic Assessment, General Education, and Co-Curricular Committee meetings as well as other regular meetings. Informal ways of engagement included email, phone, virtual, and in-person correspondence. The DIA frequently jotted notes relevant to these interactions.

Content Analysis

The DIA implemented a two-pronged approach to analyzing content. The first prong focused on reviewing internal documentation relevant to academic assessment. The second prong focused on reviewing external documentation relevant to academic assessment. The purpose of analyzing internal and external resources was to gain a better understanding of whether assessment guidance strategies that have been implemented by other organizations may be appropriate to consider at MiSU to improve the ways in which academic program assessment guidance is organized and disseminated internally. Internal content analysis included reviews of several resources, such as the [Academic Assessment](#) webpage, [Academic Assessment Policy and Procedure](#), [MSU Assessment Terminology](#), [Academic Assessment Calendar](#), [Assessment 101 Basics slides](#), [Assessment Planning Diagnostic](#), [Arranging Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes](#), [Academic Assessment Liaisons](#) webpage, [Assessment Liaisons meeting minutes](#),

[Program Assessment templates](#), [MSU Student Learning Goals](#), [Ad Hoc Student Learning Assessment Committee report](#), [Assessment of General Education](#) webpage, [Gen Ed Assessment reports](#), and other resources relevant to assessment. External content analysis included reviews of program assessment manuals from higher education institutions, assessment guides prepared by professional organizations, journal articles, reports, videos, podcasts, and other sources to gain a better understanding of guidance that is available in the field of higher education program assessment as well as how guidance may be organized. Some of the external sources that were reviewed are listed as reference entries in Appendix A.

YPA Report and Plan Reviews

At the time of this report, DIA had read 56 academic YPA reports and plans and 13 three-year reflection tables. Twenty-five reports and plans and 68 three-year tables were not yet submitted.

Results

This section includes two subsections. The first addresses areas of academic program assessment that have been working well. The second focuses on areas where there appears to be room for improvement.

Working Well

Several improvements have been made to MiSU's culture of academic assessment in recent years. The institution has made substantial strides to advance the supports for program assessment and the relevance of assessment. Examples of supports include common templates, guidance documents, and technical assistance for YPA requirements and processes. Establishing a common language and a YPA template that is the same for all academic programs has been helpful. Feedback from some Chairs indicated the template clearly outlines the requirements of

details to be provided in the report and plan. They expressed gratitude for having a YPA document that allows them to write the report and plan in a single file, the prompts for documenting their closure of the assessment loop by describing decisions that have been informed by assessment results, and efforts that have been made to simplify the YPA template.

The previous Academic Assessment Directors have worked extensively on cultivating a collective energy across the institution that tends to understand the value of assessment. In addition to providing templates, guidance documents, and technical assistance, they created sustainable opportunities for the broader campus community to inform the development and refinement of academic program assessment methods, which led to the establishment and implementation of the Academic Assessment Liaisons group and Student Learning Assessment Committee (SLAC). Interviews with Chairs revealed that the YPA process seems to be much more intentional than it was in the past. For accredited programs, the details provided on the YPA tend to align well with the assessment requirements of their accrediting bodies. Some feedback suggested that the annual program assessment process used to feel like checking a box, but it now seems to serve a relevant purpose.

Areas for Improvement

Although the YPA tools and processes have made notable improvements in recent years and appear to be working well in many ways, further improvements in some areas may be worthwhile considerations. Potential areas for improvement are outlined through themes of template consistency, efficiency, relevance, comprehensiveness, institutional memory, and assessment guidance.

Template Consistency

There is a common template for YPA reporting and planning that seems to be working

well for many programs; however, it has changed multiple times over the past few years.

Although the changes were implemented as improvements to the template based on feedback from faculty, annual revisions have led to some frustrations related to confusion about which template is the correct version and whether the reporting and planning requirements have changed from one year to the next.

Efficiency

There is room for improving the efficiency of preparing, submitting, and organizing the YPAs. In terms of preparing YPAs, locating YPAs and supplemental documentation from prior years can be cumbersome, and copying and pasting details from the prior year to the current year seems monotonous. In terms of submitting and organizing the YPAs, the current process requires authors to email the YPAs to their Chair. Then, the Chair reviews and emails the YPAs to the DIA to be uploaded to SharePoint folders that the DIA creates each year. The DIA replies to Chairs via email to confirm receipt of the files. If changes are made to any of the files, similar steps are taken to submit and organize the files. Other institutions have begun implementing program assessment information systems to increase efficiency by streamlining the preparation, submission, and organization of annual reports and plans.

Relevance

The relevance of program assessment can be unclear at times. For example, faculty do not always understand how to analyze the data they collect, some programs struggle with quantifying learning in meaningful ways, and connections between assessment results and budgetary decisions sometimes seem vague.

Comprehensiveness

The comprehensiveness of information provided in the reports and plans varies. Although

the template includes sections for describing methods, targets, and results, the following details are not always clear for each identified outcome:

- Instrument or measure title
- Type of measure (locally developed exam, standardized exam, behavioral intervention, focus group, survey portfolio, etc.)
- Indication of whether the measure is direct or indirect
- Courses associated with the measure
- Criteria for success on each measure
- Quantifiable target relevant to each criterion
- Actual results compared to targets

Institutional Memory

MiSU has been using SharePoint to compile and organize YPAs. Navigating the system to retrieve historic reports, plans, and other related information, as well as compare YPA information between years, is not always intuitive or feasible.

Assessment Guidance

Program assessment guidance exists, but it is often siloed in separate files and, consequently, may be challenging to locate and review. Other institutions have developed manuals as central access points to improve end-user navigation of resources with definitions, templates, examples, and other assessment-related guidance and tools. Feedback from chairs and other faculty suggests that additional guidance may need to be developed on clarifying assessment language, condensing data into reportable metrics, establishing targets, writing operational goals, completing the YPA forms, and clarifying due dates.

Actions

This section summarizes a few actions that have been taken as responses to the identified areas for improvement since the DIA began employment on September 1, 2021. Actions include developing a YPA dashboard, developing guidance on completing the three-year table, exploring Strategic Planning Online (SPOL), piloting SPOL, and beginning to draft a program assessment manual. Each action is described below.

YPA Dashboard

The YPA dashboard responds to the need for improving institutional memory by serving as a single point of access for efficiently retrieving YPA reports, plans, three-year tables, appendices, and feedback. The files remain stored in folders on SharePoint with the same organizational structure that has been utilized in previous years. An Excel spreadsheet was created to compile links to the files that are stored on SharePoint. A Power BI dashboard was created from the spreadsheet. Users of the dashboard can quickly search for YPA files by selecting Year, Program Type (Academic or Co-curricular), Department, and Program values from the slicers. In addition to providing efficient access to YPA files, the dashboard helps identify which reports, plans, and three-year tables have and have not been submitted. The dashboard is available on the Assessment Reports subpage of the Academic Affairs webpage. As of the writing of this report, the dashboard is only available for reports and plans submitted during the fall of 2021 (i.e., 2020-2021 reports and 2021-2022 plans).

Three-Year Table Guidance

Guidance was created to help programs understand the requirements for completing the three-year reflection table. Resources that have been developed to support completion of the table include an updated template, an example, a description of the requirements with a diagram,

and a video tutorial. The video describes common elements that are required for the three-year reflection table, identifies which elements are required for each column, and describes a contextual example that represents all the required elements in each of the three columns. These resources are available on the Academic Assessment subpage of the Academic Affairs webpage.

SPOL Exploration

SPOL is being explored as an alternate method of compiling YPA reports, plans, and supplemental files. Utilizing SPOL would replace the need to write YPA reports, plans, and three-year reflection tables in Microsoft Word templates; submit the files and supplemental documentation via email; and store the content on SharePoint. SPOL elements have been mapped to the sections of MiSU's template to how it would capture all details that are required to be submitted in the YPA. Meeting the requirements for the YPA SLG and SLO sections of the plan and report are achievable in the SPOL Assessment Module. Meeting the requirements for the YPA Operational Goal and Outcomes sections of plan and report are achievable in the SPOL Planning module.

SPOL Pilot

Piloting the SPOL assessment module has begun with the BSEd Math and Teacher Education Unit programs. SPOL seems to be functioning well for the pilot programs. The process of identifying BSEd SLGs and SLOs to add to SPOL resulted in reduced redundancies between BSEd SLGs and SLOs and improvements in alignments between BSEd and TEU SLGs and SLOs.

Assessment Manual Draft

An initial outline for a program assessment manual has been identified and some content has been drafted. The current draft provides guidance on key elements of and templates for

writing mission statements, student learning goals, and student learning outcomes. The outcomes section includes guidance on requirements for describing measures and criteria and writing target values.

Recommendations

Recommendations stemming from the identified potential areas for improvement include adding historical files to the YPA dashboard, recruiting additional programs to pilot SPOL, and completing and disseminating the first version of an academic program assessment manual. Adding YPA files submitted before the fall of 2021 to the Excel spreadsheet that is connected to the YPA dashboard is expected to improve institutional memory by facilitating efficient access to historical files. Completing the first draft of a program assessment manual is expected to improve the accessibility and clarity of program assessment guidance. Expanding SPOL pilot opportunities to other programs is expected to support improvements in the consistency, efficiency, comprehensiveness, and relevance of annual reporting as well as institutional memory, especially if an expanded pilot leads to institution-wide adoption of SPOL. Consistency of the reporting process would be likely to improve because the established user-interface in SPOL would be less likely to change from year to year than the structure of a Microsoft Word template. Efficiency would be likely to improve because information is entered directly into the system and there would be automated workflows to facilitate the submission, review, and approval process. Comprehensiveness of information would be likely to improve because data entry fields in SPOL would help ensure that required details are provided for each outcome. Relevance would be likely to improve because there would be a common format for reporting targets and actual values that would facilitate answers to the following key questions that are not currently possible to efficiently answer at various levels within the institution.

- To what extent are targets being met?
- Which areas of learning appear to be the strongest and weakest?
- Which areas of learning appear to be showing positive, negative, or neutral trends across time?
- Which areas of learning appear to be meeting and not meeting targets?

Reporting target and actual values as percentages of students meeting the criteria of success in SPOL would facilitate efficient answers to these questions at course, outcome, program, department, and institution levels. Furthermore, relevance would be likely to improve by connecting student learning to program planning and, if the respective modules are utilized in SPOL, program and institution accreditation reporting and budget requests. Institutional memory would be likely to improve by having a single system for accessing current and historic YPA plans and reports.

Limitations

This report provides a high-level summary of the condition of academic program assessment at MiSU. Its general scope is not conducive for interpreting intricate details embedded within the context. Furthermore, this report was written by an individual author who began working as the DIA approximately five months before the report was finalized. Although he put forth diligent efforts to immerse himself in the culture of assessment at MiSU, there are undoubtedly attributes of the institution's program assessment background and current reality that he does not fully understand. Consequently, this report lacks details that may have contributed to a more accurate depiction of MiSU's condition of academic assessment.

Conclusion

The condition of academic program assessment at MiSU has demonstrated notable

improvements throughout the past few years. Advancements have included the development of common templates, guidance documents, and other resources as well as implementation of technical assistance specific to program assessment theory and processes. Although improvements have been made, there appears to be room for further enhancements in areas of template consistency, efficiency, relevance, comprehensiveness, institutional memory, and assessment guidance. A few actions over the past few months that have been taken to support improvements in these areas include developing a YPA dashboard, developing guidance on completing the three-year table, exploring Strategic Planning Online (SPOL), piloting SPOL, and beginning to draft a program assessment manual. Recommendations for further support include adding historical files to the YPA dashboard, recruiting additional programs to pilot SPOL, and completing and disseminating the first version of an academic program assessment manual. Given the substantial advancements that have been made over the past few years, the current state of development, and the opportunities for additional enhancements, the condition of academic assessment at MiSU seems to represent an appropriate stage of implementation and is well-positioned for continued progress.

Appendix: Reference Entries for Examples of External Content Reviewed

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