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Integrating Shared Governance and Planning Structures in the Self-Study Process

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Abstract

Preparing for the Higher Learning Commission's accreditation visit at Minnesota State University, Mankato entailed several challenges that arose within the three years prior to the visit: recent turnover in top administration posts, new initiatives in strategic planning, and plans to offer the institution's first doctoral degrees, all of which had to be dealt with in the context of the HLC's new criteria for accreditation. Thanks to the strong support of the new administration and established systems of self-governance, the Self-Study Committee was able to integrate and document the efforts of the administration, faculty, staff and students in meeting these challenges. The document became a focus for summarizing an array of new initiatives, assessing continued challenges, and preparing to address those challenges.

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**Introduction.** Minnesota State University, Mankato undertook the major portion of its self-study for reaccreditation in 2004-2005, with a campus visit from the Higher Learning Commission team in February 2006. The visit was very successful despite several challenges that had emerged during the three years prior to the visit that might have led to a negative review by the consultant-evaluator team. Recent turnover in top administration posts, new initiatives in strategic planning, and plans to offer the university's first doctoral degrees were the most significant marks of recent and rapid institutional change. In addition, those changes had to be addressed in the context of the HLC's new criteria for accreditation. Thanks to the strong support of the new administration and established systems of self-governance, the Self-Study Committee was able to integrate and document the efforts of the administration, faculty, staff and students in meeting these challenges. The document became a focus for summarizing an array of new initiatives, assessing continued challenges, and preparing to address those challenges. As a result, the university's self-study report could continue to serve the university community as well as the Commission's peer review team.

**Context.** A number of contextual challenges presented themselves as the campus began its self-study. The top administration had turned over substantially from the last visit of the HLC, including a new President. At the Cabinet level, only one Vice President remained from ten years before, and only two Deans of the newly-expanded 11-member Council of Deans remained. The new President had initiated a series of "Strategic Priorities" for planning just two years before the self-study, meaning that many of these projects would be incomplete when the HLC team arrived on campus. In addition, just six months before the Commission team visit, while the self-study report was going through its final revisions, the Legislature authorized Minnesota's seven state universities to offer doctoral degrees for the first time, and Minnesota State's planning for such degree programs was just in the early stages. With the additional challenge of writing a report that would meet the HLC's new accreditation criteria, these

contextual challenges could have presented a “perfect storm” that might have caused institutional turmoil and resulted in an unfavorable HLC review.

**Administrative Turnover.** Turnover in key administrative positions had the potential to derail the self-study process. In Fall 2002, Dr. Richard Davenport became the new President of Minnesota State University, Mankato. In the three-and-a-half years between his appointment and the scheduled visit from the HLC in February 2006, the University saw three new Vice Presidents, including the ones for Academic Affairs (Vice President Scott Olson) and Student Affairs, the redefinition of the other three Vice President positions, and searches for four new Deans in the six colleges, as well as a Dean of Graduate Studies. One of the departing Deans, who became Vice-President at another school, had been Co-Chair of the Self-Study Steering Committee. All of these changes, however, ultimately strengthened the self-study process and report and set the tone for a successful team visit through the principles of continuity, commitment, and communication.

**Continuity:** Following early discussions with those already involved in the self-study, President Davenport endorsed and supported the team that had been assembled by the previous interim President. That support was continued and enhanced by Vice President Olson, who, shortly after taking office, held a welcoming dinner for the Self-Study Steering Committee at which he reissued the committee’s charge. Other Deans, Vice-Presidents and faculty and staff leaders who were continuing in their positions offered important help, documentation and insights from their own “institutional memory,” especially important in clarifying details of particular events and policies that the document would describe.

**Commitment:** The new administration readily offered support and resources to the self-study team, including sponsoring trips for the coordinators and/or team members to the HLC Conference and to other regional meetings and workshops on topics dealing with the new Commission criteria, assessment, service learning, and other subjects. Other support included hiring a consultant reader and graduate student assistants who helped with the self-study web site and the final document formatting. Vice President Olson also hosted several dinners to celebrate the teams’ work at different stages.

**Communication:** The President’s Expanded Cabinet and the administration, faculty and staff leadership on the campus meet-and-confer committees were provided with continual updates on the self-study process. They, in

turn, provided important documentation and feedback that allowed the team to frame contexts and provide content for each of the HLC's criteria and core components. Emails and telephone calls, face-to-face meetings with individuals, committee meetings, and open meetings all provided important information and feedback but also helped to give many of these campus constituents a sense of the "big picture" and their role in the institution as a whole. Many of these lines of communication took place through the University's unusual governance structures, which enhanced the self-study in a number of ways.

**Shared Governance at MSU.** Minnesota State's shared governance system is unique even among the other six state universities whose faculty engage in collective bargaining with the institution's parent organization, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system. The University's approach, which substitutes monthly "meet-and-confer" sessions between faculty and administration for a faculty senate, had been a source of concern during the last NCA accreditation visit in 1996 and was a point that was addressed in a follow-up Focused Visit by the Commission in 2000. The governance system had improved substantially by that time, but the Focused Visit team still called for continuing improvement in making academic and faculty-related personnel decisions. It would be necessary for the Self-Study Report to describe this governance structure, detail its operations, and document its successes. Much of the University's actual work, for example, is implemented and reviewed through university-wide "sub-meet and confer" committees of key administrators and faculty, staff, and student representatives who deal with issues relating to planning, budget, curriculum, assessment, faculty development, and related issues. The scope of these governance efforts even sometimes eludes members of the university community who are focused on their own particular area, whether as teachers, students, or other campus workers, so there was the danger that the collaborative nature of these committees could escape the understanding of an outside reviewer who was used to more traditional models of governance.

If the unusual nature of the system presented challenges in writing the Self-Study Report, however, the Steering Committee also recognized that the document could have the advantage of clearly presenting the meet-and-confer system, its successes and its areas for improvement to the entire university community as well as to the Consultant-Evaluator team. For example, in the recent Strategic Priority planning process, a series of task forces had been formed to address particular areas of the university's operations and to make recommendations for future action. Most of these recommendations went through the various sub-meet and confer committees for discussion

and approval. While all of these efforts had to be mentioned in relation to HLC Criterion 2: Preparing for the Future, specific discussion of these initiatives would be spread throughout all five of the HLC's criteria in the report. The challenge in writing the document was to minimize the risk of losing the focus of these planning efforts, while displaying to the Commission team and to the University community how planning was being integrated into and implemented through the university's existing administrative and governance structures. Those structures, though, were also crucial to the success of the actual self-study process itself.

**Enlisting Shared Governance.** The challenge for any committee leading the institutional accreditation process is not limited to the successful completion of a great self-study document or preparing the campus for the visit by the evaluation team. An important part of the committee's work, months in advance, consists of enlisting the various constituencies of the institution to participate in the process. A key element, and perhaps the most important, of a successful accreditation process is the active involvement of the university community.

In 2003, the Accreditation Steering Committee was appointed through established university procedures for such committees, with one faculty representative from each of the six teaching colleges, one for library and other non-teaching faculty, as well as representatives of the collective bargaining units for service and administrative faculty, support staff and middle management, and the student government. In the course of the committee's actions, the co-chairs and members gathered and disseminated information within the university while learning about the Higher Learning Commission's new criteria for accreditation and the standards and practices of the self-study processes. That exposure to the HLC's new criteria and processes even led all of the authors—a vice president, a dean, and a faculty member—of this 2007 HLC Conference presentation to become Consultant-Evaluators themselves. The ability to look at the self-study process from the perspective of the Commission as well as of the University also contributed to the self-study's ultimate success.

**The New HLC Criteria.** The new HLC Criteria were going through their own final development while the self-study was getting underway, with MSU's team visit occurring during the second year of using the new criteria. If the actual standards for using this new format were still somewhat uncertain, the self-study team also realized from the beginning that the new criteria—with their emphasis on mission, accountability, and planning—actually presented a great opportunity for the University to define itself not only to the HLC peer review team but

also to its own constituents. The University's mission and Strategic Priorities seemed to fit well in the five criteria, providing a natural structure for that would allow the Self-Study Report to "tell the story" of the University and its activities. At the same time, it was not always about how best to deal with specific types of information in relation to each of the core components. For example, should the bulk of information on budgeting go under Criterion 1, 2, or 3? Should assessment processes be detailed under Criterion 3 or 4? The new "strategic priorities" that were just being developed would obviously provide most of the content under Criterion 2: Preparing for the Future, but some different planning elements would have to be covered in more detail under other criteria, especially 3 and 4.

Communication with key administrators and committee members helped to determine the most appropriate placement of some of that information, but we also received useful suggestions from our HLC liaison, Dr. Robert Appleson, about moving some important information from one core component to another. At the same time, our focus on and discussion of these issues highlighted the importance to the University of preparing for change while integrating principles of assessment, budgeting, and planning in all aspects of the institution's operations. The overriding principle in all of these decisions about organizing the report, however, were guided by the document's focus on mission.

**Communicating Mission at Every Turn.** The centrality of mission at any institution, as identified under Criterion 1 is unquestionably the basis of any accreditation process. Our ultimate goal in this reaccreditation process was to demonstrate that Minnesota State is an institution driven by its mission to promote learning while assuring the integrity of its operations in all areas. Communicating the mission through the shared governance process became the cornerstone of the self-study campaign across the campus, seamlessly merging self-study with self-awareness and self-governance. The mission statement of the University, while unique for this institution, shares elements with many other public comprehensive universities and reads as follows: "*Minnesota State University, Mankato promotes learning through effective undergraduate and graduate teaching, scholarship, and research in service to the state, the region and the global community.*" As the Accreditation Steering Committee planned its activities, it acknowledged early on the need to enhance the role and visibility of the mission in each and every activity of the University.

**Publicity.** The committee was fully in charge of its own communication with the different university

groups and constituencies through its website, which could be accessed from the University's home page, and through a wide range of other means. Quickly, though, the committee found itself working with the offices of University Communications and Printing Services, who provided valuable expertise. Because the full mission statement was a bit long for anyone to remember, a short version was adopted for internal use: "*to promote learning.*" This was easy to remember and fit on buttons that were distributed to everyone during the President's Convocation at the beginning of the crucial 2005-2006 academic year. For the visit itself, the short motto was printed on a large banner and balloons and table tents that were distributed around all campus offices. These mementos, all with the University colors and logo, were readily recognizable as part of the unifying "mission at every turn" theme. By the time of the campus visit, the HLC Consultant-Evaluators found nearly universal knowledge of the mission throughout the campus. Just as important, the mission became the linchpin for detailing the university's accomplishments under each of the HLC criteria in the Self-Study Report.

**Writing the Document.** The self-study document itself was assembled through the co-authorship of the Steering Committee co-chairs, but they were assisted in their efforts by input from almost every corner of the university, greatly facilitated by the governance structure. Much of the information provided came from existing documentation that was gathered and stored electronically or in print form in the HLC team resource room. The chairs of the sub-meet and confer committees provided vital input and often wording for particular passages and sections of the report. As one section of the report was completed, it would be sent for review to key personnel for comments and corrections, and open meetings were held to gather informal feedback as well. Some of those who provided important input and feedback included the President, the Vice Presidents, the Deans, the chairs of sub-meet and confer committees and others involved with particular aspects of university life. The Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Studies, the Division of Student Affairs, and the Director of University Assessment were just a few of the others without whom the report could never have been written. In this process of continual feedback and revision, however, a few basic principles remained paramount:

1. Use the self-study to indicate how the university is moving forward in a new century
2. Detail how the university knows that it is being effective in its current operations and that it is moving in the right direction for the future
3. Indicate where the university will continue to go after the team visit



These principles guided the self-study team in deciding how to handle the question of planning for future doctoral programs. While this effort had begun too recently to be a major part of the Self-Study Report itself, the administration and faculty members involved in this planning realized that the team visit was a perfect opportunity to take advantage of the knowledge and expertise of outside reviewers. The Self-Study report alluded to the pending doctoral programs throughout discussion of the five criteria, but it also included a set of pointed questions regarding future planning efforts and doctoral programs for the team's attention in their role as consultants. Those questions and the team's replies have been important points of reference as the first doctoral programs are about to be launched in the next year.

**Conclusion.** As in most other aspects of life, it has become an axiom that "change is the only constant" in higher education. Taken together, the HLC's new criteria, the structural and operational changes under a new administration, and the University's ongoing planning initiatives presented the challenge of capturing the process of change in a single document, a "snapshot" in time of a dynamic institution. From the beginning, though, the self-study team and the key participants in the self-study process realized that the Self-Study Report and the activities leading up to it were a part of those processes of change themselves. The self-study was one way of summarizing those changes and suggesting their implications for the future of the institution. The self-study process also provided an opportunity for the University to take stock of itself, to assess and evaluate its successes and to recognize the continuing challenges that changes in demographics, technology, and politics were posing. Now, the document's questions and the team's replies have been integrated into our planning, while the self-study itself provides information, resources, and models for future planning and actions. While every institution of higher learning is unique, attention to common principles can assure that the self-study process will be successful not only for the team visit, but for the institution's future as well.