

QUALITY CHECKUP REPORT

Metropolitan State University

St. Paul, MN
March 25-27, 2009

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Background on Quality Checkups conducted by the Academic Quality Improvement Program

The Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) conducts Quality Checkup site visits to each institution during the fifth or sixth year in every seven-year cycle of AQIP participation. These visits are conducted by trained, experienced AQIP Reviewers to determine whether the institution continues to meet The Higher Learning Commission's *Criteria for Accreditation*, and whether it is using quality management principles and building a culture of continuous improvement as participation in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) requires. The goals of an AQIP Quality Checkup are to:

1. Affirm the accuracy of the organization's online Systems Portfolio and verify information included in the portfolio that the last Systems Appraisal has identified as needing clarification or verification (System Portfolio Clarification and Verification);
2. Review with organizational leaders actions taken to capitalize on the strategic issues and opportunities for improvement identified by the last Systems Appraisal (Systems Appraisal Follow Up);
3. Alert the organization to areas that need its attention prior to Reaffirmation of Accreditation, and reassure it concerning areas that have been covered adequately (Accreditation Issues Follow Up);
4. Verify federal compliance issues such as default rates, complaints, USDE interactions and program reviews, etc. (Federal Compliance Review); and
5. Assure continuing organizational quality improvement commitment through presentations, meetings, or sessions that clarify AQIP and Commission accreditation work (Organizational Quality Commitment).

The AQIP peer reviewer(s) trained for this role prepare for the visit by reviewing relevant organizational and AQIP file materials, particularly the organization's last *Systems Appraisal Feedback Report* and the Commission's internal *Organizational Profile*, which summarizes information reported by the institution in its *Annual Institutional Data Update*. The report provided to AQIP by the institution is also shared with the evaluator(s). Copies of the Quality Checkup report are provided to the institution's CEO and AQIP liaison. A copy is retained by the Commission for the institution's permanent file, and will be part of the materials reviewed by the AQIP Review Panel during Reaffirmation of Accreditation.

Clarification and verification of contents of the institution's *Systems Portfolio*

In the judgment of the team, the institution's Systems Portfolio accurately represents its identity, its missions, the challenges it faces, the commitments it has made, its accomplishments to date, and its potential for future achievement. Its documentation of its performance relative to its commitment to continuous improvement reflects the expectations of the Commission and of AQIP. The additional materials prepared by the institution for the further information of the Quality Checkup visiting team were well organized, substantive, and, where appropriate, candid.

Review of specific accreditation issues identified by the institution's last Systems Appraisal

The institution's last Systems Appraisal affirms that Metropolitan State University presents evidence that it complies with each of the Five *Criteria for Accreditation* and each of their Core Components. The materials prepared by the institution in advance of the Quality Checkup site visit did not reveal specific accreditation issues, nor did the team identify such issues in the course of its visit.

Review of the institution's approach to capitalizing on recommendations identified by its last Systems Appraisal in the *Strategic Issues Analysis*.

In the team's judgment, the institution has made significant progress in responding to recommendations advanced in the Systems Appraisal (pp. 7-8), as follows:

- The planning process, at a rudimentary stage prior to the Systems Appraisal, appears widely understood throughout the institution as a driver of decision-making in the midst of a challenging period. Annual review and modification of the plan ensures its currency and impact. Evidence of the process appears in the creation of a budgetary contingency fund, in a strategic approach to significant growth in enrollments, in planning for capital construction, and in the likelihood of a significant increase in tuition. The University presented satisfactory evidence that it met this goal of the Quality Checkup. The institution's approach to the issue, documentation, and performance were acceptable and comply with Commission and AQIP's expectations.
- Although concerns remain with regard to the availability of usable data, there is ample evidence that the development of strategic priorities relies heavily on data that is available

and that such priorities are broadly perceived as rooted in relevant objective information. For example, the Nursing program used data regarding the writing skills of its graduates as the basis for developing a new program requirement: an upper-level writing course.

- The materials prepared prior to the Quality Checkup site visit attest to the creation of coordinated processes for the handling of student complaints. The visiting team verified that these processes are in effect and are in use. For example, multiple complaints from students regarding the acquisition of book vouchers prompted a process improvement that eliminated the cause for complaint.
- Although MSU remains committed to acquiring and consulting comparative data, its efforts to do so have revealed the striking singularity of the institution. On the basis of a number of relevant factors, including its program mix, the demographics of its constituencies, its approaches to program delivery, and its determination to remain lean, without many of the extraneous trappings of more traditional institutions (athletic teams, recreation programs, residential life opportunities, etc.), may to a considerable degree make it “peerless.” Nevertheless, the team believes that the University should continue so far as is practicable to measure its performance relative to that of the peers it has identified so that its self-evaluation may rest on a more objective and secure base.
- The University continues to expand its assessment process, and there is clear evidence in the testimony from faculty members and from students that a culture valuing the use of data to inform program improvement is growing and should become well established within the near term. However, as noted below, the University may be making less than optimal use of some fundamental methods; informative syllabi in every course and meaningful course evaluations should not be overlooked even as more notable strategies are implemented.

Review of organizational commitment to continuing systematic quality improvement

In the team’s judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence of its commitment to continuing systematic quality improvement. MSU’s documentation of its commitment and its performance relative to that commitment are persuasive and consistent with Commission and AQIP’s expectations. For example, in many, though not all, academic disciplines, feedback loops are now in place, and some disciplines, such as Nursing, can point to substantive gains in program effectiveness through the application of assessment data. Moreover, assessment

results have prompted substantive program actions such as the closure of one program that was identified and the substantial revision of three others.

USDE issues related to default rate (renewal of eligibility, program audits, or other USDE actions)

In the team's judgment, the institution has addressed USDE compliance issues related to its use of and accounting for federal student aid funding and should qualify for continuing approval at the time of the June 2009 USDE review.

Compliance with Commission Policy IV.A.8, Public Notification of Comprehensive Evaluation Visit

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it had provided adequate public notification prior to the Quality Checkup.

Compliance with Commission policy 1.C.7, Credits, Program Length, and Tuition

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that its standards for academic credit, the lengths of its programs, and its tuition fall well within the parameters established by the Commission. The institution's approach to the documentation of these areas of compliance was acceptable in the view of the team and appears to comply with expectations of the Commission and of AQIP.

Compliance with Commission policy IV.B.2, Advertising and Recruitment Materials

In the judgment of the team, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that its advertising and recruitment materials represent MSU accurately, tastefully, and informatively.

Compliance with Commission policy III.A.1, Professional Accreditation, and III.A.3, Requirements of Organizations Holding Dual Institutional Accreditation

In the team's judgment, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it meets all

applicable expectations with regard to professional accreditation. The University does not hold dual institutional accreditation.

Compliance with Commission policy IV.B.4, *Organizational Records of Student Complaints*

As noted above, in the judgment of the team, the institution presented satisfactory evidence that it has significantly improved its recording of student complaints, as well as its pursuit of the resolution of such complaints. An example appears above.

Other AQIP issues

In the pursuit of compliance issues and of the topics required to be addressed in this report, the Quality Checkup visiting team observed also a number of ancillary issues bearing on the issue of continuous improvement. Most are positive, as follows.

- The institution's pervasive commitment to continuous improvement is providing a "tool" for the management of its mandate for the "aggressive growth" of its enrollment. Planning for this growth is observing appropriate qualitative issues. For instance, the University seeks to protect through a period of anticipated growth its historical strengths: attentive advising, instruction in small classes, and scheduling that meets student needs. There appears to be broad appreciation of the budget challenges facing the University and of its opportunities for growth notwithstanding.
- A concerted effort to improve communications within the University on planning and budget issues appears to be paying dividends. E.g., a "Budget Conservation Forum" has attracted a wide range of suggestions from faculty and staff regarding potential costs savings, revenue enhancements, and efficiencies. There appears to be broad appreciation of the University's budget challenges and of its opportunities for growth.
- Administrators, faculty, and students agree on a word commonly used to apply to the educational experience offered by MSU: "transformational." Small classes taught by concerned faculty in an institution committed to meeting student scheduling requirements are some of the elements in an extraordinarily student-centered institution. Other important elements include an experienced and dedicated staff and leadership that share an understanding of the value of consultation and delegation.

- Continuous improvement has become part of the culture of the University or, as one respondent said, “an ingrained pattern of thought.”
- A significant commitment to online learning has increased access to the University’s offerings and has had the additional value of encouraging the identification of clear learning outcomes even for face-to-face courses.
- The commitment to continuous improvement is enhanced by the expertise and experience of community faculty who lend their voices to the definition of learning outcomes. The terms of employment of community faculty—continuing contracts, engagement with institutional planning, and access to professional development—enables the University to exercise care in hiring such faculty and helps to ensure quality.
- Metropolitan State University has a compelling story to tell. Given current trends in higher education, its pioneering model may in time prove the dominant mode of delivery. That said, the University could tell its story far more compellingly. The new magazine represents a commendable beginning, but much more might be done.

In the view of the Quality Checkup visiting team, some issues may deserve the continued attention of the University, as follows:

- Although some meeting participants defended a lack of explicit references on campus to AQIP or to continuous improvement, the visiting team believes that an institution’s identifying its commitment to assessment and qualitative growth through the terms of AQIP can be helpful and is consistent with the expectations of an institution participating in AQIP.
- Similarly, while the visiting team appreciates the importance of a wide spectrum of change initiatives, it believes that the identification of selected Action Projects as paradigmatic of the broader continuous improvement agenda is both appropriate and consistent with the expectations of an institution participating in AQIP. The University’s striking record of accomplishment with regard to Action Projects—the improvements in search processes for classified and unclassified staff, the implementation of DARS/CAS, the development of improved student orientation, etc.—suggest the value of designating among many worthy initiatives three or four that represent genuine strategic aims, that engage (or have implications for) several functional areas, and that lead to tangible change.
- On the one hand, the University distributes itself effectively to the community; on the other, some of its constituencies observe that it offers less than might be desirable in terms of

opportunities for the socialization of students and for the collegial relationship of faculty members.

- The planned growth of enrollment through the addition of daytime offerings may increase the demand for opportunities and services associated with more traditional students.
- Because expectations regarding communications continue to evolve rapidly, the University's continued exclusive reliance on modes that have become from some perspectives traditional (e-mail, telephone) may over time limit the effectiveness of its communications strategy. The planned "communications audit" is timely, in that it may disclose alternatives both for the delivery of communication, for the confirmation of that delivery, and for the receipt of responses.
- Although there is commendable progress presented by some disciplines with regard to continuous improvement, the University appears willing to accept that not all its programs are "at the same stage." The University may wish to work towards greater uniformity across the board in the effectiveness of its assessment and quality improvement commitments.
- Use of a simple ingredient in continuous improvement at the department level, the distribution in all classes of informative syllabi listing expected learning outcomes, appears inconsistent. The detail of syllabi, now exclusively on-line, differs widely and "depends on the teacher." Clear expectations in this regard might provide a valuable expression of the institution's continuous improvement commitment. A salutary example in this regard would be the graduate program in management, which has defined common learning objectives for a multi-section course. Similarly, in-class assessment might be far more fully developed. Several students reported their impressions that end-of-semester course evaluations "go straight into the wastebasket." Even if this is not the case, the impressions students share should represent a concern.
- The University should continue to work with the Office of the Chancellor in an effort to refine state and system documentation and allocations processes so that they become more responsive to its singular mission.