



Middle States Commission on Higher Education

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June 15, 2011

TO: Dr. DiRionne Pollard, President
Dr. Stephen Cain, Chief of Staff/Chief Strategy Officer
Dr. Kathleen Wessman, Vice President for Planning and Institutional Effectiveness
Montgomery College

FROM: Linda Suskie, Vice President

SUBJECT: **Follow-Up to June 13, 2011, Visit to Montgomery College**

I write to thank you all for your gracious hospitality during my Commission-directed liaison guidance visit to Dutchess on June 13, 2011, and, as President Pollard requested, to provide a forthright summary of the key points discussed during my visit.

This visit followed an action taken by the Commission on May 5, 2011:

To acknowledge receipt of the substantive change request, and to include the online Associate of Arts in General Studies and Associate of Arts in Business within the scope of the institution's accreditation. To request a progress report, due March 1, 2012, documenting the knowledge, skills, and/or competencies that constitute the key program-level learning outcomes of these programs and implementation of an organized and sustained process to assess and improve student achievement of those outcomes, including direct evidence of student learning. To direct a Commission liaison guidance visit to discuss the Commission's expectations. The Periodic Review Report is due June 1, 2013.

For the record, I note that my visit included meetings with the following groups and individuals:

- President Pollard, Dr. Cain, and Dr. Wessman
- Finance officers and staff
- Academic deans and other academic administrators
- Faculty representatives, including faculty governance officers and faculty involved with assessment

The Montgomery College community has many justifiable sources of pride. Montgomery College has been at the forefront among community colleges in assessing student learning outcomes, the primary subject of this visit, for roughly a decade or more. The faculty and administrators with whom I met were mutually respectful and clearly dedicated to Montgomery College's mission of access and opportunity and to meeting the needs of its large and diverse student population. Most importantly, I sensed widespread, open, candid acknowledgement that, despite Montgomery College's many strengths, there are matters that need prompt attention in order for the college to move to an even greater level of excellence in the quality of the education it offers its students.

The purpose of my visit was to help everyone understand what prompted the Commission to request the March 1, 2012, progress report and what the Commission will be looking for in that report, as well as in the June 1, 2013, Periodic Review Report. The college's March proposal to add the online AA General Studies and AA Business programs (a substantive change that required Commission approval) did not document evidence of compliance with Standards 11 (Educational Offerings) and 14 (Assessment of Student Learning). This raised concern that the Montgomery College community may not fully understand Commission expectations for these two standards and therefore might not submit a successful Periodic Review Report in 2013. The Commission therefore requested the progress report to help ensure that the college is on track to submit a successful PRR.

The purpose of my visit was only to offer guidance. I am not a peer accreditor, and I do not conduct reviews to determine compliance with Commission standards. But during my visit there was open acknowledgement among the faculty and administrators with whom I met that the college's academic programs may also not be in compliance with Standard 12 (General Education) and the Additional Locations and Distance Learning components of Standard 13 (Related Educational Offerings).

There is thus reason for questions about Montgomery College's compliance with four of the Commission's 14 standards: Standards 11, 12, 13, and 14. This is a significant proportion, and these four standards address the heart of Montgomery College: the quality of its academic offerings. Today, as government officials and business leaders increasingly question the quality of American higher education, the Commission is enforcing its standards with greater rigor. Were a Middle States evaluation team to visit Montgomery College today, there would be a real possibility that the Commission might act to warn Montgomery College that its accreditation is in jeopardy. Should Montgomery College not document compliance with relevant standards in its March 1 progress report and 2013 Periodic Review Report, again there is the real possibility of being placed on warning. Warning is a serious matter. Some community colleges that have been placed on warning by the Commission have consequently lost gifts, eligibility for grants, local support and, most importantly, reputation until their accreditation is reaffirmed.

Here are the areas of concern regarding each of these standards that we discussed during my visit.

Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

This Standard and its Fundamental Elements include the following statements:

- "Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation or other appropriate points, the institution's students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and higher education goals."
- "Clearly articulated statements of expected student learning outcomes at all levels (institution, degree/program, course) and for all programs that aim to foster student learning and development, that are appropriately integrated with one another"
- "Assessment results that provide sufficient, convincing evidence that students are achieving key institutional and program learning outcomes"
- "Evidence that student learning assessment information is shared and discussed with appropriate constituents and is used to improve teaching and learning"

Over the past decade, Montgomery College has been a leader among community colleges in the assessment of student learning, engaging primarily in course-level assessment. As the quotations above show, the Commission does not explicitly require course-level assessment, but it requires assessment of

program-level, general education, and institutional-level outcomes. (Some course-level assessments, of course, can be important components of program-level and general education assessments.)

At this point, it appears that program-level outcomes have been crafted, but some programs' plans to assess them either have not yet been developed or are largely unimplemented. Those whom I met acknowledged, for example, that there is no process to assess the General Studies AA learning goal that students make connections between what they have learned in the program and their subsequent plans. It therefore appears that Montgomery College does not yet have "assessment results that provide sufficient, convincing evidence that students are achieving *institutional and program* learning outcomes" (emphasis added).

Standard 11: Educational Offerings

This Standard and its Fundamental Elements include the following statements:

- "The institution's educational offerings display academic content, rigor, and coherence that are appropriate to its higher education mission. The institution identifies student learning goals and objectives, including knowledge and skills, for its educational offerings."
- "Educational offerings...conducted at levels of rigor appropriate to the programs or degrees offered"
- "Formal...programs—leading to a degree or other recognized higher education credential—designed to foster a coherent student learning experience and to promote synthesis of learning"
- "Provision of comparable quality of teaching/instruction, academic rigor, and educational effectiveness of the institution's courses and programs regardless of the location or delivery mode"
- "Course syllabi that incorporate expected learning outcomes"
- "Assessment of student learning and program outcomes relative to goals and objectives of the undergraduate programs and the use of the results to improve student learning and program effectiveness"

Faculty and administrators with whom I met shared candidly that some courses do not have a core set of clear, course-level learning outcomes that are shared across sections. One professor may emphasize content knowledge, for example, while another emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills. The Commission does not require that every section of a course be identical in content and pedagogy, but it does expect *course*—not section- or campus-specific—syllabi that state the *course's* key learning outcomes. If sections of a course are not appropriately consistent in what they address, Montgomery College risks that students in some sections may be unprepared for subsequent work or study and that the college's programs may not be fostering the "coherent student learning experience" that Standard 11 requires.

One program specifically discussed during my visit was the General Studies AA. It consists of Montgomery College's general education curriculum plus free electives, which students may choose without faculty or advisor input nor an articulated plan. Such a program fails to comply with this standard in two ways. First, it is entirely possible for a student to complete the program without taking any 200-level courses—a level of rigor inappropriate for an associate's degree. Second, the program lacks the coherence, integration and synthesis that the Commission expects.

In order to comply with this standard, the General Studies AA must have clearly stated, appropriate learning outcomes, and it must be designed to ensure student achievement of those learning outcomes, as well as have appropriate expectations for sophomore-level study. During my visit, I noted that the Commission's concerns can be addressed in multiple ways. Montgomery College can develop more structured tracks within the program; it can limit applicable courses to those that help students achieve general education competencies to a greater degree; or it can continue to allow students to design their own individualized programs, provided that they identify their own program learning goals, take courses that will help them achieve those goals, and document their achievement, perhaps through a portfolio.

I am aware that similar programs are offered by other Maryland community colleges. I have spoken with Sue Blanshan at MHEC, and she concurs with this analysis. She will be getting in touch with the Maryland community college association to discuss this further.

Standard 12: General Education

This Standard and its Fundamental Elements include the following statements:

- “The institution’s curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency.”
- “Institutional requirements assuring that, upon degree completion, students are proficient in oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, and technological competency appropriate to the discipline”
- “Assessment of general education outcomes within the institution’s overall plan for assessing student learning, and evidence that such assessment results are utilized for curricular improvement”

Montgomery College has adopted as its general education learning outcomes the competencies listed in Commission standards: written communication, scientific reasoning, and so on. In order to comply with this standard, the general education curriculum must be designed so that all students *must* take general education courses that collectively address *all* of these competencies. The general education distribution requirements have not yet been aligned with these competencies, however, so at this time it is possible for a student to fulfill all general education requirements and graduate without having achieved all general education competencies. Montgomery College’s curricula must be designed so that *every* student, regarding of whatever general education courses he or she chooses to fulfill each requirement, will achieve *every* general education competency by the time he or she graduates.

Standard 13: Related Educational Offerings: Across Campuses

The section of this Standard’s Fundamental Elements regarding multiple locations includes the following statements:

- “Offerings at branch campuses, additional locations, and other instructional sites that meet standards for ...academic rigor, and educational effectiveness comparable to those of other institutional offerings”
- “Activities and offerings at other locations meet all appropriate standards, including those related to learning outcomes”

The section of this Standard's Fundamental Elements regarding distance (online) learning includes the following statements:

- "Distance learning offerings that meet institution-wide standards for quality of instruction, articulated expectations of student learning, academic rigor, and educational effectiveness. If the institution provides parallel on-site offerings, the same institution-wide standards should apply to both."
- "Demonstrated program coherence, including stated program learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded"

There was candid acknowledgement during my visit that steps need to be taken to ensure "comparable quality of teaching/instruction, academic rigor, and educational effectiveness of courses and programs" across Montgomery College's three campuses and in its new online offerings. It appears that faculty teaching in any particular discipline at any one campus may not always interact regularly with their colleagues at the other campuses to ensure appropriate consistency in curricula and standards. While this may have been fitting when the three campuses were separately accredited, today Montgomery College's curricula must be appropriately consistent, wherever and however they are delivered, in order to comply with this standard.

Progress Report Due March 1, 2012

I shared during my visit that this progress report will need to:

- Clearly state the core expected learning outcomes of the Business AA and General Studies AA. (Because the curricula for online and face-to-face versions of these programs should be essentially the same, the focus should be on the Montgomery College Business AA and the Montgomery College General Studies AA, not just the online versions of these programs.)
- Document that the curricula (including courses offered online) are designed to ensure that students have sufficient opportunity to achieve each stated outcome.
- Document a clear, detailed, implemented process to assess those learning outcomes (including in online offerings), with timetables and responsibilities.
- Where possible, summarize assessment results to date and how those results have been used to improve teaching and learning.

While it appears assessment strategies tied to the Business AA's program-level learning outcomes have not yet been developed, at this point faculty and administrators should have a significant amount of course-level assessment evidence from Business courses, much of which should relate to the program-level learning outcomes. The progress report should therefore present a summary of any course-level assessment evidence to date that clearly ties to the Business AA's program-level learning outcomes, along with information on how that evidence has been used.

Montgomery College will need to take a different approach in reporting on assessment of the General Studies AA in the progress report, because assessment cannot take place without clearly articulated learning outcomes and a curriculum designed to achieve them. (There's no point in assessing something if students don't have the opportunity to learn it.) The progress report should document, at a minimum, the program's updated learning outcomes and its reconceptualized curriculum, along with a clear, detailed plan to assess those outcomes. While I can never predict a Commission action, the Commission may well request that the 2013 Periodic Review Report document implementation of the General Studies AA assessment plan.

Suggestions

During my visit, I offered the following suggestions for the Montgomery College community to consider. Please note that these are only my personal suggestions. You are free to disregard them, and of course there is no guarantee that following them will result in any particular Commission action.

1. **Take a semester to reflect and plan.** After a number of years of course-level assessment, it may be time to sit back and take stock of those years of work. Consider suspending course-level assessment, only for the Fall 2011 semester, and use that semester to review assessment efforts to date. What has worked well? What has been useful? How has the time spent on assessment compared with the value and usefulness of that work? How can you use what you have learned from this experience to improve assessment practices? Then use this analysis, along with the program-level learning outcomes and curriculum maps that have been completed, to design cross-campus program-level assessments that will be implemented starting in Spring 2012.
2. **Focus on useful, cost-effective assessments.** Resources are so stretched these days that Montgomery College cannot afford to spend significant time on activities that only generate reports to Middle States. If a particular assessment has had no further value,, stop doing it and do something else that will be locally useful. To ease the assessment burden while maximizing impact, consider focusing general education assessments only on the most popular courses within each distribution requirement.
3. **Begin a transition from course-level to program-level assessment.** While course-level assessment has been an excellent way to introduce faculty and administrators to assessment and to assess some program-level and institution-level outcomes, reports on course-level assessment are not required by the Commission and can be burdensome. Consider gradually phasing down reports on course-level assessment (perhaps incorporating them into academic program reviews), focusing only on those course-level assessments that contribute useful information about program-level and general education learning outcomes.
4. **Develop processes to ensure that the general education curriculum is and remains aligned with its learning outcomes.** A regularly-updated curriculum map that matches general education courses and their course-level outcomes with Montgomery College's general education competencies would likely be a useful tool. A periodic, systematic review of general education courses to ensure that they continue to address appropriate general education competencies would also be valuable. The faculty committee conducting this review might use a simple scoring guide to evaluate whether each course has appropriate learning outcomes, whether the curriculum sufficiently addresses those learning outcomes, how students are assessed on their achievement of each learning outcome, etc.
5. **Consider incentives and rewards for engaging in and supporting assessment...and efforts to improve curricula and pedagogies.** One example discussed during my visit was performance review criteria. Criteria for evaluating deans and other academic administrators, for example, could include promoting a culture of assessment and evidence-informed planning and decision-making within their units.

6. **Consider promptly designating someone with lead responsibility for coordinating the General Studies AA.** This will help ensure that appropriate work on this program is completed in time for the March progress report.
7. **Consider naming college-wide assessment coordinators for each academic program.** This may relieve some burdened department chairs and promote much-needed cross-campus conversations and collaboration on assessment...and, eventually, college-wide program improvements in teaching and learning.
8. **Ensure that professional development opportunities meet faculty and staff needs.** Kathy Wessman has faithfully attended Commission conferences and workshops, but she is only one person at a very large college. Consider ensuring that professional development opportunities on assessment (and teaching and learning) are available to a wider range of faculty and administrators. In this context, I note that my visit indicated that some faculty and administrators may misunderstand how academic freedom applies to assessment. I'm attaching a recent paper from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment in which Gary Rhoades of AAUP makes clear that working collaboratively with faculty colleagues to identify learning outcomes, adopt common pedagogical or curricular standards, and assess student learning are *not* violations of academic freedom.

I hope these suggestions are helpful...and, again, please remember that they are only my personal suggestions. Please let me know if anything in this memo doesn't match your understanding of my visit. Please also feel free to contact me if you have any further questions or concerns as you prepare the progress report due March 1, 2012, and the Periodic Review Report due June 1, 2013.

Attachment