

Missouri Western State University

CQR Quality Highlights Report

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Introduction

Missouri Western State University is pleased to submit this Quality Highlights Report in preparation for our upcoming Comprehensive Quality Review visit. In this document we provide an updated portrait of institutional initiatives that strategically address institutional needs and ensure continuous quality improvement. In conjunction with that portrait, this report examines several key opportunities that were noted in the Systems Appraisal Feedback Report (SAFR) received on March 9, 2015 and connects the institutional initiatives that address these opportunities for the advancement of the university in achieving its mission.

Self-Reflection on Feedback

The Systems Appraisal Feedback Report identified 85 items across the nine categories that were rated as strengths, 5 as outstanding strengths, 48 as opportunities and none as outstanding opportunities. We are pleased to see the strong ratio of strengths to opportunities, as it indicates that the reviewers find Missouri Western to be performing at a high level. That said, we recognize that continuous improvement is essential for success and will continue to address opportunities.

Every category included opportunities for the institution to improve, but the most notable were connected to the systematic use of evidence and the ways in which Missouri Western demonstrates how it values its employees. Additionally, our focus upon student learning was an area of strength, however a number of opportunities for further improvement were also identified.

As the report will show, each of these areas have been part of a strategic institutional focus. This includes modifications to organizational structures and policies, the creation of new positions that will enable us to ensure sustainable change, and the implementation of four Action Projects that directly address various aspects of institutional need. We view these Projects as opportunities for continuous improvement and institutional leaders are committed to their success.

Finally, the report indicated that the evidence provided in the Systems Portfolio demonstrated that Missouri Western meets each of the Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components. It should be noted that five of the Core Components (2D, 3D, 3E, 5B, and 5D) were marked as “adequate but could be improved” in terms of evidence. Our efforts in each of the areas of institutional focus provide additional evidence of how Missouri Western clearly meets each one.

Areas of Institutional Focus

Increasing Student Success and Retention

As an open admissions institution, Missouri Western attracts a wide range of students with diverse backgrounds, levels of preparation, and areas of interest. This diversity is central to our role within the region and ensures that our citizens have opportunity for an affordable, high quality educational experience. However, this also presents challenges as we seek to serve the large number of students who are at risk – including those who are academically underprepared, those who are first generation, and students with financial challenges. Additionally, we have found that students from under-represented populations are particularly vulnerable to being at risk. We have undertaken several broad strategies in order to better serve these students and to ensure that they have every chance to persist to graduation.

Functional Reorganization - An important first step in this effort was to integrate key enrollment management and student retention functions, including the Registrar's Office, Admissions, and ATLAS (Advising, Tutoring, Learning & Academic Support). This reorganized unit is led by the newly created position of Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Retention who reports directly to the Provost. The position was filled February 2016 and the new Associate Vice President is implementing a number of changes. This reorganization has already enabled us to better coordinate retention efforts across the institution, identify policies and practices that inhibit student success, and to improve communication between functional areas.

Serving At Risk Students Action Project – This recently initiated project is intended to increase our capacity to effectively serve students, particularly those who are at risk. The project will provide training and resources to front-line staff members (e.g., administrative coordinators in departments) who are often the first point of contact for students. Staff members participating in the project will be trained to identify the resources appropriate to meeting individual students' needs, connect students to those resources, and to follow-up to ensure the needs are met.

We believe this project will greatly increase the “safety net” for students, particularly for those who are unsure of the resources available or do not know what office on campus or community agency might provide them. These students are often the most at risk and they frequently approach front-line staff members regarding their questions. By training and empowering these employees, students will be more effectively and efficiently supported. A related outcome from this Action Project is increased employee satisfaction as we equip and recognize these front-line staff members. To that end, this Action Project also supports our efforts related to valuing employees described below.

This Action Project is a pilot initiative involving a relatively small number of employees. However, our expectation is to expand the project to all of our academic units after assessing its impact upon student success.

Policy Changes – The new Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Retention has led an effort to ensure that we take a student-centered approach in our policies and practices. Seeking to remove structural and procedural barriers for student success, we are currently making a number of changes. Beyond those noted here, we are also exploring other changes that can increase student success.

First, we are increasing the threshold for financial holds on student accounts that prevent them from registering for the following semester. For many students, this change will ensure that they are prepared for the upcoming semester while still having adequate time to make financial arrangements.

Second, we are changing the timing of financial aid award letters so that students receive them much sooner. This will allow them to plan more effectively for their financial needs and enable staff in Financial Aid and the Registrar's Office to address questions in a timelier manner.

Third, we are adjusting the spring semester registration dates so that they occur prior to spring break. This will enable academic advisors to begin identifying academic needs sooner as they assist students with planning. It will ultimately help ensure that students are on target to persist to graduation.

Finally, we are asking each department to create annual course schedules. This will enable students to know when relevant courses will be offered in both the fall and spring semesters. Ultimately, this will empower students to better plan their academic experience and identify hurdles they must address in a timely manner.

Though each of these changes is relatively minor, the cumulative impact is potentially quite large. We anticipate that we will better serve our students and help them achieve success.

Meta-Majors Action Project – Missouri Western has recently become involved with the Complete College America (CCA) project and is implementing meta-majors, one of the key elements of the “Guided Pathways to Success” portion of the CCA project.

Meta-majors are focused groupings of related content areas which allow students to investigate a broad array of courses across academic programs. Following these pathways ensures that students who are Explorers (those with little direction) and Mind Changers (those in transitions) find a major and make timely progress toward degree completion. Entering students who are undecided are advised within a meta-major (called “focus areas”) to help them explore interests, take appropriate courses and then select a particular major.

This project is designed to provide structured guidance for students in setting appropriate and realistic educational and career goals. It will also offer structure to advisors who are advising students who do not have a specific direction in mind as they begin their higher education careers. This structure will allow advisors to help re-direct students that lack

academic direction and create an initial connection or “academic home” for students that are still deciding on a major.

Another aspect of this project is the identification of “milestone” courses that are critical to success in each major. With this information in hand, advisors will be able to provide better guidance to students regarding their progress in the major and to ensure that they are on target for timely degree completion.

The project was initiated this past academic year (2015-16) with the development of a set of focus areas, creation of training materials for advisors, and a coordinated communication plan. Focus areas will be used with the entering class for fall 2017, with assessment of the project to be completed at the end of the 2016-17 academic year.

Corequisite Remediation – Over the past two years, mathematics faculty have been engaged in a project that has made changes in developmental and general studies math courses. This project was initiated in light of statewide expectations regarding modifications to developmental education, with a primary goal of decreasing the time students take to successfully complete their general education math requirements.

Faculty addressed this goal in two ways. First, they created a mathematics placement exam that provides additional insight into the students’ knowledge of math in every topic covered by our most basic general education math course. The preliminary results from this exam indicate that it provides increased predictive power regarding students’ likelihood for success in this course. These results are tentative, however, and firm conclusions can only be reached after additional students take the exam.

Second, faculty developed a new course that allows students to remedy deficiencies in developmental math while obtaining general education math credit in the same semester. This course uses “just-in-time” remediation through a credit-bearing lab taught in conjunction with the general education course. We have only had the course in place for one year, but are seeing promising results thus far. Faculty are recommending changes to the course structure this next year in order to further strengthen the positive outcomes. We look forward to an analysis of the additional data in order to make appropriate modifications in this project.

Evidence and Assessment

One of the clear themes presented in the SAFR is the importance of providing compelling evidence to support claims regarding institutional effectiveness and improvement. Missouri Western is committed to the development of a stronger “culture of evidence” – one that values the utility of assessment and analysis in setting institutional priorities and determining results. We believe that continuous improvement is only possible through sustained and systematic attention to evidence across every area of the institution. As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, Missouri Western has taken several significant and substantive steps, which are outlined in this section. These steps will enhance

institutional operations (previous AQIP Category 6) and strengthen the measurement of effectiveness (previous AQIP Category 7).

Director of Assessment and Institutional Research – A first step in our efforts was to create and fill the position of Director of Assessment and Institutional Research. Beginning work in August 2015, the Director has communicated the critical role of assessment across campus, created new structures and processes to support assessment, and worked closely with units in every division to help them create viable assessment plans.

University Assessment Committee – As one of the Director’s initiatives, Missouri Western has created the University Assessment Committee (UAC). This was an intentional decision to encourage communication as well as transparency in how and why decisions are made in regards to institutional assessment initiatives. The UAC is comprised of members representing each institutional division (i.e., Financial Planning and Administration, Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and University Advancement and the Foundation), the Cabinet, and the faculty.

The UAC operates with the mission of encouraging and supporting assessment as an ongoing process of identifying unit values, collecting relevant data, and appropriately analyzing the findings to inform decision-making that will contribute meaningfully to the process of continuous improvement.

The UAC meets monthly to review assessment plans and reports, discuss and plan assessment initiatives, and makes decisions regarding assessment programing. Committee members represent their distinct area and act as a liaison to help further communicate, inform, and support assessment related initiatives.

The development of an official Institutional Assessment website is designed to serve the campus community as a common resource point for the purpose of identifying members of the UAC, viewing UAC meeting minutes, UAC approved assessment documentation, and providing a direct and documented channel for feedback or comments on assessment related initiatives occurring on campus to the UAC. The formation of the UAC and the Assessment website is to provide MWSU with a systematic and coordinated effort to communicate and respond to stakeholders’ needs with regards to assessment.

Assessment Action Project – Central to our efforts focused on supporting institutional operations and measuring effectiveness is the implementation of an Action Project on assessment. This project enables us to standardize assessment reporting across campus into a uniform process while allowing units and departments the ability to customize its assessment approach and efforts.

Each year, units will be expected to submit an assessment plan for the upcoming year. In the plan, units detail their goals, objectives, measures, and specific targets or benchmarks for success. The use of web forms will enhance transparency by allowing all parties (faculty, staff, administrators) within the unit the ability to create and edit the web form. This

provides members of the unit the opportunity to engage in dialogue with one another about the nature of the measures and the timing of the data collection process. The structure and organization of the web form ensures users can directly connect the data collected by the selected measures to the objective or learning outcome that will provide supplementary evidence in support of the goal that unit would like to obtain.

The Director of Assessment and Institutional Research provides guidance to the unit and serves as an external unit reviewer of the appropriateness of the data proposed to address the assessment inquiries of the unit. Units will complete the web forms each year and at the year's end will provide a report of the assessment findings which will be reviewed by the UAC to ensure the interpretations of the findings are appropriate. These additional levels of external review beyond the unit enhance the reliability of the data. Archives of the web forms for the annual assessment plans and reports will be available to units. These archives will provide units with the opportunity to longitudinally track past assessment efforts and initiatives as well as their success and non-success to enhance efficiency and avoid duplication of assessment efforts or projects.

Technology in Support of Assessment – As part of our efforts to facilitate the use of assessment to inform decision making across the entire campus, Missouri Western is creating a web-based assessment system. Assessment plan and report web forms are currently being designed and programmed by the institution's Instructional Media Center to provide various campus units and departments with an assessment tracking system.

The web forms will use technology to track, record, and report the success and non-success of departmental activities to determine the appropriateness or effectiveness of initiatives that support student learning as well as student and stakeholder services. The forms will allow all institutional units and departments to annually plan assessment goals and objectives while providing details on the measures used to collect the data. Both the plans and reports will undergo review by the UAC in order to confirm the integrity of data collection methods and the appropriate use of the data to inform unit level decision making.

The web forms also provide divisional supervisors and administrators with review and comment capabilities. Leaders then have the opportunity to review unit documents and provide direct feedback. The added function that the technology provides support communication within the division as well as transparency. Specifically, administrators will have immediate access to all of the unit plans and reports in their area as well as the ability to make recommendations directly on the forms that all unit members have immediate access to view. This eliminates the potential for miscommunication or misunderstanding between the various levels of unit leadership.

Data Analytics Initiative – In order to advance our efforts to make data-informed decisions, Missouri Western is in the early stages of implementing an enterprise-level data analytics solution. While there is a strong commitment to student success and continuous improvement, there is widespread frustration related to the difficulty of having accessible and meaningful data that could be used to strengthen academic advising and policy-making.

Most importantly, data that could assist academic advisors to intervene with timely and appropriate actions are not readily available. This is also true for groups who have assigned responsibility for recommending policy and processes designed to improve student retention and graduation rates.

Additionally, data is currently maintained in too many locations. Many processes are conducted on paper, and information is stored in varying locations, from the Banner system, to the CRM, to local servers, and in departmental files. Timely policy, program development, program improvement, and managerial decisions are difficult to make, as there is not one system that will help us to track, analyze, and disseminate information.

Insights provided in the SAFR underscore the importance of this need: “The University has an opportunity to use data about underprepared students and to put in place intentional strategies for serving and retaining this population.” Reviewers also stated, “MWSU.... is poised to achieve greater results by expanding its assessment abilities and by collecting and analyzing data to inform continuous improvement in helping students learn.”

The lack of complete and timely information exacerbates the problem of academic advisors having too many students to advise. Many faculty advisors, whose primary role is to teach, have over 50 advisees assigned to them to meet with each semester. This creates problems for the at-risk student who needs more individualized attention to succeed. Of the low-income (Pell-eligible) students who were in the Fall 2013 freshman cohort, 66.4 percent took at least one developmental course during the 2013-2014 academic year, and 14 percent were on probation or academic suspension by the end of the first year. These students need an excess of time to learn about the benefits of remedial education, while our first-generation students take more time to learn about the basics of higher education. Having easily accessible, accurate and timely information would provide more time for the advisors to assist, and make the time students spend with their advisors more valuable.

In order to accomplish this goal, Missouri Western will implement an integrated planning and advising system. We will obtain this system by partnering with a suitable company having the expertise and technology to connect and analyze our institutional data. Through this partnership, we will be able to employ predictive analytics and provide student-specific information through web-based applications to academic advisors, faculty, staff and administration.

More importantly, this information will be updated on a daily basis and enable us to support students in real-time while they are taking classes - not merely diagnosing what went wrong after the semester has concluded or after mid-term grades are input. In addition to providing information to employees, the selected company will also provide software for students that can be easily accessed through the web or via mobile applications. This will enable students to examine their progress towards degree completion, easily conduct what-if analyses comparing time to complete alternative degree programs, and to see career opportunities for each option.

Overall, this initiative will increase the success of at risk students, improve retention and graduation rates, more effectively support institutional operations and strengthen our ability to measure effectiveness.

Valuing Employees

A host of opportunities identified in the SAFR are connected to valuing the employees of Missouri Western. As an educational enterprise, we recognize that the success of our students is inextricably linked to the success of our employees. Missouri Western simply cannot achieve its mission unless employees are engaged, empowered, and supported. The university is fully committed to addressing the opportunities in this area and has undertaken several initiatives in order to do so.

Valuing Employees Action Project – Missouri Western attended the February 2016 Strategy Forum held in Oak Brook, Illinois. The group was comprised of the President, Vice President of Student Affairs, Dean of Graduate Studies, Director of Assessment, Faculty Senate President, Associate Provost, and another member of Faculty Senate. During the Forum, the group examined the opportunities identified in the SAFR and ultimately focused upon those connected to valuing employees.

Upon returning to campus, a team was formed to create and lead an Action Project in this area. Members of the team represent every division of the University and include staff, faculty and administration. The team was tasked with the development of an Action Project that will strengthen institutional efforts to demonstrate the value of our employees, enhance their professional development, and connect them to our vision for student success, no matter their role at the University.

The Project Charter, which will be uploaded to the HLC system shortly, outlines four broad areas that will be addressed through the initiative. These four areas are as follows:

- 1) Professional Development
- 2) Communication and Social Interactions
- 3) Onboarding
- 4) Employee Recognition

Professional Development: Employees need the opportunity to increase their skills, be prepared for promotions, and to serve in different capacities. Professional development is essential in order to support those aims. The sub-committee focused upon this area will identify current gaps in professional development, propose new in-house development opportunities, and recommend external development experiences that address the needs of our employees.

Communication and Social Interactions: Organizational health is supported through healthy two-way communication. Employees throughout the institution need routine opportunities (both formal and informal) to provide input and feedback, voice concerns, and share ideas.

As a learning organization, Missouri Western should exemplify the value of dialogue and engagement in our efforts to continuously improve. This area of the Action Project will identify broad strategies to make this a reality.

Onboarding: The process of onboarding new employees is critical to ensuring an effective transition to the University, enabling them to be quickly connected to the culture of Missouri Western as valued members of the campus community. Currently, orientation and onboarding activities focus exclusively upon new full-time faculty members. No similar program exists for staff members or part-time/adjunct faculty members. Members of this sub-committee will address this opportunity by developing an onboarding experience that can be implemented in 2017.

Employee Recognition: While Missouri Western certainly values its employees, it is important that we more effectively communicate to them their value to the University in tangible ways. The work of this sub-committee is to identify strategies that let people know that their contributions to our campus and the broader community are appreciated.

Employee Feedback – One of the areas of opportunity identified in the SAFR was a commitment to intentional measurement (assessment) of employee needs. The document went on to state, “MWSU is poised to achieve greater results by collecting and analyzing data to inform continuous improvement in valuing people” (p. 6). To that end, we are engaged in several initiatives that will systematically collect relevant feedback from employees.

First of all, our annual performance appraisal form now includes a space for employees to identify professional development goals. The Valuing Employees Action Project includes a directive to assess that information and to ensure that units find ways to more effectively support employees in their development.

Second, in an effort to collect meaningful data in regards to MWSU as an employer, the institution recently participated in the Great Colleges to Work For program sponsored by The Chronicle of Higher Education. The purpose of this program is to randomly and anonymously recruit employees to respond to a work place survey monitored by a third party. Invited employees are given an opportunity to provide insight on the quality of their work place experience and their satisfaction with policies, facilities, and benefits.

The results from this survey will provide institutional leaders with a better understanding of the University’s strengths and limitations. The program will provide us with benchmarked data from other similar institutions as a method of comparison. This data will be used to inform decision making on how to make MWSU a better place of work in regards to domains such as professional development, teaching environment, compensation, facilities, and resources.

The program also allows employees to comment on what they appreciate the most about MWSU and what they think would make it a better place of work. Participation in intentional assessment programs such as Great Colleges to Work For allows employees the opportunity

share with leaders their values and needs. The added ability to benchmark employee responses to other comparable institutions provides MWSU with meaningful data to calibrate strategic planning, processes, and programming that further promote a culture that values employees.

Conclusion

Missouri Western is firmly committed to continuous improvement as the means of fulfilling its mission, which states: *“Missouri Western State University is a learning community focused on students as individuals and as members of society. Missouri Western offers students at all stages of life the opportunity to achieve excellence in the classroom and beyond, as they prepare to be leaders in their work and in their communities. As a leader itself, Missouri Western is committed to the educational, economic, cultural and social development of the people and the region that it serves.”*

Furthermore, our vision states that “Missouri Western State University will set the standard for excellence in student development and community leadership.” Doing so requires that we continue to assess and adjust our strategies, practices, and policies in order to achieve excellence in every area.

This document has outlined a number of key initiatives focused upon critical aspects of institutional effectiveness. All of these projects are in process and while we are confident that they will serve our aims well, we will examine the evidence to determine their relative success.

We welcome the additional feedback of reviewers and look forward to productive conversations regarding the future success of Missouri Western.

Links to Documents

- 1) University Policy Guide (includes all policies related to faculty and staff)
<https://www.missouriwestern.edu/hr/>
(Click the link “MWSU Policy Guide” on the navigation bar on the left hand side of this site)
- 2) Student Handbook
<https://www.missouriwestern.edu/studentaffairs/student-handbook/>
- 3) Institutional Catalog
<http://catalog.missouriwestern.edu/>