



President's Report to the Board

April 2013

I often find myself quoting the first two sentences of our mission statement, in which we pledge to empower our students to change their lives and to enrich the life of our community. But it is the third sentence—*we are accountable for our results*—that is on my mind each and every day, not only because of my personal belief in the importance of accountability—of owning our successes *and* our failures—but also because our external funders and accreditors are demanding accountability.

As we face stricter standards, it has become increasingly clear that our institution can no longer rely on previous performance and a steady reputation. Our new and very urgent reality is that we *must* proactively assess ourselves and make necessary changes or face the very real possibility of receiving requirements or recommendations from our accreditors to which we must respond. While you recently reviewed the Periodic Report we plan to submit to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in May, this month's report provides you with additional context on the accreditation process, as well as the specific standards that pose the greatest challenges, and on which we are focusing.

The tightening accreditation belt is a nationwide phenomenon, happening at all levels of education. In his State of the Union address in January, President Obama specifically mentioned accreditation and his plans to “call on Congress to consider value, affordability, and student outcomes” when determining whether colleges and universities receive federal aid as a result of the accreditation process. The pressure that institutions are under to provide our accreditors with proof of student success and student outcomes starts at the very top with the president of the United States. As such, the Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation are holding regional and national accrediting bodies to higher standards. They are demanding that accredited institutions prove clear outcomes assessment, budgeting and planning alignment, institutional measurements of effectiveness, and financial viability, among other requirements.

As a result, the process of accreditation has constricted. We once underwent a major accreditation event every 10 years, but now every visit by the accrediting agency could become an accreditation event. The intrusive self-assessment every decade requires us to produce a Self-Study, which Middle States



explains must include “rationale, scope, expected outcomes, questions that it intends to answer during the self-study (charge questions), participants, and timetable for the self-study process.” At the midpoint between self-studies, colleges are required to provide a Periodic Review, which is a mini-self-study that serves as “retrospective, current, and prospective analysis” of the progress of the institution since the last self-study. In the past, this period in the review cycle would be a “check-in” to assure everything was still in good order, but not a particularly high stakes time for us, as the matter of reaccreditation was judged only during the decennial evaluation. But now, Middle States can place an institution on probation, give a warning, or even remove accreditation at any time.

In addition to a more stringent procedural process, Middle States is demanding more of us from a substantive perspective as well. The sun has set on receiving accreditation based on the College proving such facts as a certain number of faculty members with high-level academic degrees or a certain number of books in the library. Today accreditation is no longer about inputs—the investments the College makes in order to educate students—it is all about our outputs. For instance, as I explain in great detail below, we must show clearly and explicitly the direct linkage between our actions and our students’ successes. In essence, we must have the analytics to prove our students are learning what we say they are learning. Having a renowned faculty, expansive course offerings, and record student enrollment is not enough; we must explicitly show how those components are directly benefiting student completion.

Additionally, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education appoints a special reviewer to look at all of our financial decisions to show that we have a methodical process in our money allocation. For the first time, we are required to submit a compliance report this year that shows the specific ways our College is meeting federal, state, and local laws and regulations.

Middle States evaluates institutions based on 14 standards, seven of which deal with institutional context, and seven of which address institutional effectiveness. When we submit our Self-Study and Periodic Review, they must address each standard and the specific steps taken at the College to meet the requirements. I encourage you to review all the standards [online](#).

In this report, I discuss only the two standards of significant concern to most institutions: Standards 7 and 14. It is no coincidence that both of these standards have to do with how institutions hold themselves accountable. More than 60 percent of institutions are receiving some sort of negative feedback from Middle States in regards to these two standards. Sixty percent! In fact, Middle States has created a task force specifically to look at these two standards and specify how institutions can better meet the expectations.

Standard 7 focuses on institutional assessment, and whether “the institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards.” Because of our College Area Review process, during which we examine every unit, I believe we have a proper process in place to ensure compliance with Standard 7. One area of concern has to do with aligning our unit goals to our strategic plan. But, I am optimistic, based on the work we have done in this regard, that the College is positioned well in our own institutional assessment.



Many institutions have heightened concerns about meeting the expectation of Standard 14, which asks whether a college has an assessment of student learning to “[demonstrate] that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.” We are months away from receiving formal feedback from Middle States about our Periodic Review. When we notified Middle States about a substantive change in our business and general studies programs, however, our Middle States liaison offered critical insight into how our accreditors may review our outcomes assessment process for these two programs.

Based on our liaison’s visit, we learned that Middle States now places an emphasis on assessing *programs*, rather than individual classes. Therefore, for an institution to fully meet Standard 14, it must prove more than student competencies in specific courses. Institutions must prove student competencies in specific *programs*. They must show how each course fits into the entire program. This requires a holistic outcomes assessment process. For instance, we need to be able to prove that all of our general studies students, regardless of the varied courses they take, develop the requisite knowledge, skills, and competencies. In other words, the general studies degree must have a consistent outcome for all of our students, even if the paths to earn that degree are not identical.

What does this mean on the practical level? It means that we cannot teach our students in a vacuum. It means that the current buzzword in our institution—alignment—must occur at every level of the organization. The specified outcome of each course must align with the outcome of the program or, in some cases, programs for which the course serves as a requirement. In some cases, this means that a single course must align its own outcomes with two different programs. For example, if a single writing course can serve as credit toward an English *or* a general studies degree, the outcomes for that course must align with *both* program outcomes. It may mean that a faculty member outside the English discipline who is teaching a course that goes toward an English degree requirement will have to ensure his or her course reinforces the required English degree competencies.

This kind of alignment will require tangible and measurable outcomes. I like to compare this to the new talent management system the College has established for employee goal-making. The new system allows individual employees to align their own personal objectives with those of their supervisors and of the department as a whole. This enables our College to create synergy between the work an individual employee undertakes every day and the overarching goals of the department in which he or she sits. It is an attempt at departmental alignment. In turn, each department aligns its goals with the goals of the institution as a whole as articulated in *Montgomery College 2020*, which supports our compliance with Standard 7. I stress that alignment does not require changing the *way* an employee works, or the *way* a professor teaches. I strongly encourage our faculty and staff to continue to embrace an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit, but there must be commonality in the outcome, even if the input is varied.

Part of this soul-searching process will require that we continually improve and fine-tune our methods of measuring and reporting student outcomes. Many universities require a capstone



course or an internship that provides an ideal venue for assessing bachelor program competencies. But, when you are at a community college, it is not as easy. For instance, sometimes our students transfer prior to receiving degrees, or there is a limit to the number of credits required for an associate's degree. Therefore, we will rely on the expertise of our faculty to devise assessment tools that will provide a clear picture of our student outcomes. For instance, perhaps there are a few courses that together encapsulate many of the program degree outcomes and, therefore, if we prove student competencies in them, we prove program-wide competency.

In addition to using data to show that our students are learning what we say they are learning, we also must hold ourselves accountable if the results do not paint a positive picture. If the outcomes are not what they should be, what actions are we taking to improve them? Again, I do not want us to tell faculty or staff *how* they should teach, but rather encourage them to experiment and find ways to ensure what they are teaching what our students need to learn.

The Middle States emphasis on programs, rather than individual courses, also has created a need for the College to look strategically at the way we number our courses. In order to receive a degree from our College, our accreditors now suggest that students complete a certain number of 200-level courses. However, the way our courses have been numbered historically has not taken into account the same type of rigorous standards under which they currently are assessed. This will require a hard look at the subject matter of each course, as well as the data available, to determine the true level of the coursework.

The College already has started to take the necessary steps to strengthen our conformance with Standard 14. A General Studies Task Force has been meeting to discuss the actions our College programs must take to conform to Middle States requirements. Starting more than a year ago, faculty and staff from different disciplines started working together to craft class and program outcomes. I applaud the areas of the College that have already taken a critical eye to their programs, such as our art and math departments. Every discipline has started a process with its lead dean and campus vice president and provost to take a deep look at the rigor of each course and determine the proper course number level. We anticipate renumbering courses by fall 2014. As you know, we are in the process of an academic redesign that will create collegewide deans to help facilitate commonality in course and program assessments. We also are allocating more resources towards the College assessment efforts, including a review of necessary personnel.

We will submit our Periodic Review next month and expect to hear feedback from Middle States early in the fall semester. It is my profound hope that our accreditors will recognize the progress we have made and reaffirm our accreditation. Institutions that are not meeting one or more of the 14 standards receive a set of requirements, which must be implemented in order to retain accreditation.

There is no doubt that the past year has opened our eyes to the importance of making a vigorous effort to meet the Middle States' higher standards. Such work was always important, but now it is more important than ever. Middle States representatives are becoming frequent visitors to campuses leading up to Self-Studies. I expect we will be no different as 2018 approaches. And I know that Middle States expects to hear institutions saying: "Look what we have done..." rather



than, "Here's what we are going to do..." I am optimistic that as we continue to improve our own processes related to the of Middle States standards, our College community will be stronger, better aligned, and poised to fulfill the third line of our mission statement: *we are accountable for our results*.

Monthly Discussion Questions¹

1. **Institutional needs.** What kind of change, if any, does our institution need?
2. **Context and competition.** Do we understand our institution's competitive position?
3. **Consequences of no change.** What are the consequences if we do not engage in a change process?
4. **Leadership capacity.** As a board and as individual board members, are we able and willing to work with our president to bring about positive change?
5. **Change process and players.** Based on this discussion, what is the right role for the board to play at this time?

¹ Adopted from MacTaggart, Terrence J., *Leading Change: How Boards and Presidents Build Exceptional Academic Institutions*, AGB Press, 2011 (pp. 21–22).

