

To: Arthur Sanders, Associate Provost for Curriculum and Assessment, and Kevin Saunders, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment

From: Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise

Date: November 12, 2013

RE: Follow up memo on visit to Drake University

On September 11-13, 2013 we visited Drake University to review Drake's assessment processes and recommend changes to enhance assessment for improvement efforts, with attention to general education (the Drake Curriculum), department, and co-curricular efforts. During our visit we were fortunate to meet with a number of different groups including:

- Representatives of the "Multi-unit and multidisciplinary collaborations" and "Support for innovative ways of learning" Task Implementation Groups for the Strategic Plan
- Administrators from five of Drake's colleges who are responsible for leading assessment efforts in their colleges
- The Drake Curriculum Analysis Committee
- A group of six Drake undergraduates
- Faculty who have used rubrics to assess critical thinking at Drake
- Representatives from Student Affairs
- Leaders of Drake's Community Engagement and Service-Learning program
- A representative from the Athletic Department

We appreciated the opportunity to meet and speak with these thoughtful members of the Drake community, and we were impressed by the number of people who took time out of their busy day to have a conversation about ways of improving the quality of student learning at Drake.

In the first section of this memo we will review some of what we have learned about ways of thinking about assessment and improvement that have proven to be useful to the colleges and universities with which we have worked. Next we will briefly review some of our observations about strengths and challenges for Drake University's efforts to use evidence to improve student learning, and finally we will outline a few suggestions for how Drake might revise the way it approaches assessment so that it provides more benefit for its students.

### **Good practices and principles for assessment**

It is important to keep the following ways of thinking about assessment in mind when designing efforts to use assessment to improve student learning:

1. *Good assessment is useful* - Assessment is a means, not an end. The sole purpose of assessment is to improve student learning. If assessment efforts are not yielding improvements in student learning, those efforts need to be revised. The quality of an assessment program should be gauged by the extent to which faculty and staff use information from the assessment program to improve the educational impact of their courses, programs, departments, and colleges. Virtually all colleges and universities have assessment programs that generate reports, but far fewer institutions have assessment programs in which the knowledge and insights from campus inquiry about student learning lead to palpable benefits to student learning. This is because most assessment programs are based on a false premise – that sending reports summarizing strengths

and weaknesses in student learning at an institution will result in changes in practice in the same way that publishing scholarly articles has an impact on a discipline. However Henderson et al.'s research on this point (2011) indicates that this is the least effective means of improving institutional practices. Effectively using evidence to improve student learning requires longer-term, focused faculty and staff development efforts.

2. *Good assessment processes are flexible* - Useful, high-impact assessment is often developed by faculty and staff in the language and epistemologies of their disciplines. Assessment leaders at institutions need to develop report templates, ways of assessing learning and the environmental factors that support learning, and ways of discussing findings with colleagues that invite people from different intellectual and methodological communities on a campus to use tools with which they are familiar. Like any inquiry process, as people become more engaged in asking questions about the complex process of student learning, they will begin to use a wider variety of tools to support that inquiry. The key is to let inquiry drive the adoption of these tools, rather than issuing a top-down imperative to adopt a single way of doing things. Developing actionable information about how to improve student learning is a multi- and inter-disciplinary project.
3. *Good assessment feeds faculty and staff development* - Evidence on student learning, and the teaching practices that support student learning, can only have impact if it reaches into the classes and programs that staff and faculty teach. Rather than distributing assessment reports via email or on websites, the only way to accomplish this is to develop and implement ongoing staff and faculty development programs that harness this information and help teachers make sense of and utilize it in the context of their classes and programs. When used in this way, it is critical that assessment information does not seep into the promotion and tenure process. Indeed, there should be a firewall between the promotion and tenure process and assessment so that individuals in the administration who play a role in gathering, summarizing, and using assessment information to create faculty and staff development programming are not involved in any way in the promotion and tenure process.
4. *Good assessment is consultative* - "Assessment" derives from a Latin word meaning "to sit beside." Useful assessment programs emphasize the same kind of high-impact pedagogies that we use in our classrooms. In particular, they emphasize active learning, in which people who have experience using evidence to improve student learning work side-by-side with faculty and staff to facilitate their efforts to make sense of and use evidence to improve their classes, programs, departments, and colleges.

### **Strengths of Drake's current assessment process**

In our conversations with staff, faculty, and students we noted the following strengths in Drake's current assessment efforts:

- Consultative approach to working with faculty, staff, departments, programs, and colleges on assessment.
- Efforts to create faculty development programming that incorporates information from Drake's assessment efforts.
- The assessment plan developed by Student Life.
- The willingness of members of Student Life staff to serve as a resource for other departments and programs.
- Assessment efforts in Drake's Athletic Department, particularly the model they are implementing of linking findings from assessment efforts with tools that coaches can use to respond to these findings.
- The campus networking model used by Drake's Community Engagement and Service-Learning program to engage a rapidly growing number of faculty from across campus in using service-learning and community engagement as a means of fulfilling Drake's educational mission.
- The many faculty and staff with whom we met who are clearly interested in finding ways to use assessment as a means of improving student learning.

In our view, the staff and faculty at Drake have already taken many important steps towards building an assessment process that will benefit Drake students. The recommendations we make in the final section of this memo will build on these strengths.

### **Challenges to assessment efforts at Drake**

Although we noted many good things about Drake's assessment practices, we also noted significant challenges to Drake's ongoing efforts to make the results of its assessment work more beneficial to students. Of course, we understand that we only visited Drake for a couple of days, so these should be understood as preliminary observations that are based on comparing what we observed at Drake with what we have observed during similar visits to other institutions across the country.

1. A general education program that will be virtually impossible to assess.
2. Drake faculty and staff will need additional support to build on the improvements to date in course, program, department, and college processes to use assessment to improve student learning.
3. The organizational structure of a large university with an undergraduate student body the size of a larger liberal arts college. In terms of assessment, Drake's complex organizational structure makes communication across the colleges on university-wide learning goals challenging and lends itself to the creation of overly complicated processes to manage the flow of departmental and college assessment reporting. In addition, the multi-college structure of this small institution creates a centrifugal force leading faculty and students to identify with their college more than

with Drake. This makes the use of assessment to improve student learning on university-wide learning goals even more challenging than it is at other institutions of comparable size.

4. A sometimes suspicious atmosphere that will make the collaborative work necessary for using evidence to improve student learning challenging. Our conversations with faculty and administrators from the different colleges included a significant number of people who indicated that assessment at Drake had begun as a “top down” process and was something that was “done to them.” The current work of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment is dampening some of these reactions. Although we noted above a number of staff and faculty who were passionate about improving student learning, we also heard some faculty conversations indicating that their department’s and college’s increased emphasis on scholarly productivity, along with high workloads, prevented them from spending time on assessment.

## Recommendations

### *1 - Continue to build the connection between faculty/staff development and assessment*

The emerging “state of art” in assessment is embedding assessment efforts into the ongoing faculty and staff development efforts of Learning and Teaching Centers. Miami University’s Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching, and University Assessment (<http://www.units.muohio.edu/celt/>) is a good example of this approach. Helping faculty and staff make sense of and use evidence on student learning to improve their courses and programs as part of an ongoing professional development program is the best way, in our view, to ensure that assessment results in improved student learning.

From our conversations with Associate Provost Arthur Sanders, we understand that creating a new learning and teaching center is a top priority in Drake’s strategic plan. We also learned during our visit that this center will include both staff and faculty in its programming. Including both staff and faculty in the center’s programming is an excellent idea not only because both faculty and staff play a critical role in student learning, but also because we heard rumblings during our visit that staff may not feel fully recognized for the important contributions they make to student learning or for their understanding of assessment. In our view, the learning and teaching center could serve to create more of the cross-unit conversations that do not seem to happen easily at Drake. Finally, given the connections that Drake is already making between assessment and faculty development programming, we believe that a learning and teaching center could serve to connect the results of Drake’s assessment efforts with the work of staff and faculty to improve the quality of their courses, programs, and departments.

We also recommend that Drake should continue developing, implementing, and expanding faculty and staff development programming in anticipation of creating the physical space for the learning and teaching center, and in doing so, operate as though the learning and teaching center is already opened and implementing programming. We heard many good ideas for faculty and staff development, but we did not learn the extent to which these various initiatives are integrated and thought of as components of an overall program of staff and faculty development.

*2 - Investigate important aspects of Drake's teaching and learning environment that may require improvement*

Based on our first read of Drake's most recent National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results, there may be a number of areas of basic teaching skills and practices on which Drake faculty could improve. For example, Drake seniors reported engaging in significantly lower levels of higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, and discussions with diverse others than did seniors at Drake's peer institutions. They were also significantly less likely to report engaging in high-impact learning strategies, and they indicated that Drake was a less supportive learning environment than students at Drake's peer institutions. These results are not only at odds with what we would expect from an institution that has students and faculty of the quality of those at Drake, but also with the expectations and standards that Drake expresses. The "Distinctly Drake" webpage, (<http://www.distinctly.drake.edu/vision/excellence.php>), describes an institution that strives for excellence. Specifically:

Excellence that Endures

It is not some static thing. Excellence, in its truest form, lives and breathes every day. It inspires everything it touches. It transcends time and discipline and takes us beyond the boundaries of imagination.

Excellence at Drake can be seen in the success of our graduates, the beauty of our campus and the quality of our programs and people.

Excellence at Drake can be seen at every turn — whether it is an exceptional Law School, cutting-edge technology in a newly renovated science laboratory, a student earning the coveted Rhodes Scholarship or the running of the internationally renowned Drake Relays for more than a century. Excellence is rooted in the fabric of our rich history and is the reason we are viewed as one of the finest master's universities in the country.

Excellence in Teaching — in the 2010 U.S. News & World Report rankings, Drake had the third highest score for academic quality among 572 master's institutions in the nation.

Excellence in Leading — our mock trial team recently won first place at the Harvard Crimson Classic.

Excellence in Achieving — the Associated Collegiate Press awarded our student-produced Drake Magazine the ACP Pacemaker Award for Magazine Excellence."

For us, excellence means aspiring to something beyond the average. A NSSE report in which, compared to the peer institutions you selected, Drake is only significantly higher than its peers on one of twenty indicators, and is significantly lower on eight out of twenty, is not "excellence." Furthermore, any attempts to draw comparisons between Drake, a relatively expensive private university, and the broad "Master's Colleges and Universities" Carnegie Classification category that includes many state regional universities—institutions such as Eastern Illinois University, Eastern Kentucky University, and Millersville State University that are less expensive (by our quick look, Drake's tuition & fees are ranked

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73 out of 397 institutions in this Carnegie category)—does not speak to Drake’s potential strength.

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### *3 - Consider a different approach to assessing the Drake Curriculum and Areas of Inquiry (AOI)*

By our count, Drake’s ten AOIs include 40 outcomes that should be covered in various combinations of 12 courses selected from a list of over 500 courses. We understand the complicated political factors that influence the creation and implementation of a general education program, and Drake is not the only institution to have a complex structure for general education. Regardless, given the current structure of the AOIs, we believe that any effort to assess the Drake Curriculum will be so complex that it will create more ill will towards assessment than it does any improvements to student learning. Not only does the sheer complexity of the AOIs create problems for assessment, the fact that AOIs include courses with varying class sizes and pedagogies that are taken at varying points in an undergraduate’s four years means that the Drake Curriculum as a whole will not likely promote the development of the learning outcomes that it is supposed to promote. There is simply too much variation in too many things to give us hope that the courses will add up to consistent learning.

We recommend a different, more holistic approach to assessing the Drake Curriculum and the AOIs. We suggest that over the coming year, Kevin Saunders and Stephanie Majeran, in collaboration with a couple of students, host six or seven focus groups of seniors to ask the following questions:

1. Reflect on and talk about the experiences at Drake that had the most impact on your education.
2. Reflect on and talk about the one or two most important things you learned in your AOI courses.

We asked the second question of the one very select group of students with whom we spoke, and their responses were both fascinating and very positive. They described how the AOI courses gave them a needed break and a different perspective from the courses in their majors and colleges. They talked about tools they picked up in these courses, such as using new software, and activities, such as community service, in which they were now engaging as a result of taking an AOI course. They also talked about the way that the courses “broadened them” and seemed to provide them with skills that they would use when they graduated. Their comments did not line up with many of the AOI learning goals, but they were important things nonetheless, and worthy, in our view, of a good general education program. Indeed, their comments sounded like what many liberal arts colleges hope that their students achieve in a general education program. We believe that a series of these kinds of conversations would allow Drake to “induce” and thereby identify a much more focused, realistic, and assessable set of AOI outcomes. Specifically, once these interviews are completed, we suggest that Kevin and Stephanie write a summary report in which they:

- A. Develop themes on three or four AOI outcomes that emerged from the conversations with students and report these themes back to the DCAC for a conversation about a reduced set of holistic outcomes that would not be assessed at the course level, but would be assessed by talking with individual students towards the end of their undergraduate career.
- B. Identify programs, departments, and courses that the students cited in response to the first

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question along with supporting paraphrases and quotes from the focus groups. They could also summarize the negative comments that students made during the conversations and distribute these as well, but without identifying the departments, course, programs, or departments at which the comments were aimed.

This report would be distributed to the university. The negative comments could also be sent privately to the individual departments, courses, and programs in a separate confidential memo. We have seen this approach bolster general education assessment at another mid-sized private university with an expansive, and difficult to assess, general education program.

In addition to identifying a much smaller set of AOI outcomes that could be assessed holistically, rather than on a course-by-course basis, the goal of this report would be to highlight the role of Drake's Office of Institutional Research & Assessment in fostering broad, cross-unit conversations about teaching and learning.

*4 - Align messages from the provost's office and the deans of Drake's colleges to faculty and staff on the value of using evidence to improve student learning*

## References

Henderson, C., Beach, A., & Finkelstein, N. (2011). Facilitating change in undergraduate STEM instructional practices: An analytic review of the literature. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 48(8), 952-984.

Pascarella, E.T., Seifert, T. A., & Blaich C. (2010). How effective are the NSSE benchmarks in predicting important educational outcomes? *Change: The Magazine of Higher Education*, 42(1), 16-22