

*Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

**A FOCUSED INTERIM REPORT**

**Montana State University - Billings  
Billings, Montana**

**May 12, 2010**

**Prepared by**

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*A Confidential Report Prepared for the  
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities  
that Represents the View of the Evaluator*

## **Introduction**

This focused interim visit and report is the result of and follow-up to a full-scale decennial accreditation visit and report that took place at Montana State University – Billings on October 13-15, 2008. The committee report concluded with three commendations and four recommendations (to be listed later in this report). The purpose of the current visit was to assess progress made regarding the four recommendations. It is hoped that the current visit and report will assist the institution in fulfilling its mission and assist in its further operation and planning.

The institution was generous in its hospitality providing all documents requested and scheduling meetings with those individuals requested. The university was kind, generous, and eager to work with the evaluator in all capacities.

The focused interim report was comprehensive, clear, and very well organized around the four recommendations. In each case, the recommendations were noted, a summary was provided, and progress since 2008 was clearly delineated and documented. Without doubt, the institution took this task very seriously and that gravity shows in its report.

**Focused Interim Evaluation Report  
Montana State University – Billings  
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## **Report on the Institutional Report, Support Materials, and Verification**

The focused interim report was comprehensive, clear, and very well organized around the four recommendations. In each case, the recommendations were noted, a summary was provided, and progress since 2008 was clearly delineated and documented. Without doubt, the institution took this task very seriously and that gravity shows in its report.

The institution provided substantial support materials both in hard copy and electronic database. Included in the hard copy materials were assessment plans, examples of change resulting from assessment activities, documentation of faculty evaluation forms and procedures adopted since 2008, a memo from the President relating to governance in a multi-campus system and actions taken, and examples of strategic planning. After requesting them the evaluator also received after the visit a spreadsheet indicating budget reduction planning in all areas of the university for FY 2011, 2012, and 2013.

Electronic materials were provided by giving the evaluator access to a SharePoint database listing all assessment plans and activities. The database is comprehensive and easily navigated and the university should be proud of its efforts to make this information easily accessible and uniform.

All of these data and information gleaned from interviews with members of the institution were utilized to verify the university's activities since 2008. In all cases the evaluator found veracity, found individuals to be forthcoming, and found that information provided was verified by documentation.

### **List of Individuals Interviewed During the Visit**

Dr. Ronald P. Sexton, Chancellor

Dr. D'Ann Campbell, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

Dr. Barbara M. Wheeling, Assistant Professor of Accounting

Dr. Lorrie Steerey, Chair of Academic Senate and Professor of Management Inform. Systems  
Academic Senate Executive Committee

Faculty Union Executive Committee

Dr. John E. Cech, Dean, College of Technology

**NEED THE NAMES AND COLLEGES OF THE OTHER DEANS I MET PLEASE**

Dr. Matt Redinger, Professor of History and Chair of the General Education Committee

## **RECOMMENDATION 1: FULL ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT IN ASSESSMENT**

*“The Committee acknowledges the progress made implementing educational program planning and assessment, but it did not find evidence that this effort is yet truly University-wide in operation and that it encompasses all of its offerings. The Committee therefore recommends that steps be taken to ensure that all academic programs are completing fully the process of learning outcomes definition, evaluation, analysis of results, and demonstration that, on the basis of such evaluation, curricular and pedagogical changes are made as needed.” (Standard 2.B.1 and Policy 2.2)*

Since the 2008 full-scale visit, MSU Billings has adopted a four-stage process to analyze and track progress in assessing student learning outcomes for degree programs. Those without assessment plans are identified as Stage 0; those involved in assessment planning are Stage 1; those who have implemented assessment planning are Stage 2; and Stage 3 are those that have further analyzed data and made changes as a result of assessment. In the year between June 2009 and April 2010 the university has gone from 22 programs with no assessment plans (Stage 0) to no programs at Stage 0. That is, all degree programs have at least established learning objectives for their students. In large part this accomplishment is the result of the university’s decision to reassign a faculty member during the 2009-2010 academic year to the position of a full time assessment coordinator. The coordinator engaged in personal development activities that allowed her to learn how to assist departments and programs in developing learning objectives and a strategy for assessment.

As of March 2010 no programs were at Stage 0. Twenty-two programs were at Stage 1 (identified learning objectives) while none are at Stage 2 and thirty-one were at Stage 3. Of these thirty-one, all have posted assessment reports to the SharePoint database. As a result of these stepped up assessment activities the programs have made important changes to their curricula. The College of Education, for example, has added a structured internship for graduate students; the College of Business has increased coverage of ethics in its courses; the Department of Psychology has modified its lab content; and the Department of Industry and Computers has increased its emphasis on oral presentations in its capstone course.

All of this bodes well and suggests important progress toward the university’s implementation of academic assessment. Clearly the university has taken this recommendation seriously and has worked very hard in a short period of time to achieve that progress. In spite of this progress, however, additional work needs to be done in order to fully achieve the goals of Standard 2.B.1 and Policy 2.2.

An examination of the materials provided indicates some shortcomings. For example, although all degree programs now have stated learning objectives, in some cases these

learning objectives are not fully formed and will need additional work. In other cases, the assessment plans will not adequately assess the learning objectives adopted by the program. An example of the former would be the Bachelor of Science in Human Services which establishes as Learning Objective #3 "Application of skills." This seems rather vague and unclear in terms of what exactly is being assessed. What, for example, are the skills that a graduate of this program should have? Any measurement would be unreliable if it is unclear what is being measured.

An example of the latter, can be found in the assessment plan for the Associate's Degree/Certificate in Accounting. Learning Objective 1 is that students must "Demonstrate understanding of terminology relative to appropriate program of accounting." The assessment plan uses surveys to determine whether this learning objective has been met. Direct measures of student learning would be more efficacious than an indirect measure such as a survey. These two programs are not singled out in any malicious way but merely to serve as examples of many other such instances that can be found in the assessment plans.

In addition, the reassignment of the assessment coordinator back to her home department means that department chairs and college deans will need to take accountability for ensuring that the gains that have been made in assessment will not be lost and that the programs will follow through with assessment measures and use of the data to make positive changes.

General Education assessment has also been positive since the 2008 full-scale visit. In spring 2009 the Academic Foundations Committee became the General Education Committee and was expanded to ensure that a member of the College of Arts and Sciences is represented for each General Education area. Meeting regularly the committee worked with faculty in the General Education courses to reduce the number of items they were asked to measure and track. This represents a more reasonable and manageable number of measures for these courses and clearly has encouraged faculty to participate.

**COMMENDATION: Montana State University - Billings has made great progress in developing learning objectives for all of its degree programs and for its General Education courses. That this has been achieved in a relatively short period time and in all programs is commendable.**

**CONCERN #1: Although all degree programs have established learning objectives in some degree programs these objectives are vague and unclear, thus making their measurement unreliable. In other cases the measures used to assess achievement of the learning objectives seem inappropriate.**

**CONCERN #2: With the reassignment of the assessment coordinator to her home department, the university must be vigilant that department chairs and college deans continue the progress that has been made to date.**

## RECOMMENDATION 2: SYSTEMATIC EVALUATION OF ALL FACULTY

*“The Committee recommends the University establish a systematic and widely communicated procedure for the evaluation of all faculty, including part-time instructors, individuals on Letters of Appointment, and others with teaching responsibilities.” (Standard 4.A5, 4.A.10, and Policy 4.1)*

Since the 2008 full-scale visit, the university has made great strides toward remediating this situation. Although faculty on the College of Technology Campus and the East Campus are under different bargaining agreements, all are systematically evaluated.

As with assessment activities the institution has categorized evaluation activities into stages. Stage 0 indicates that there is no systematic evaluation procedure except for full time faculty; Stage 1 is those programs with student assessment of teaching for all faculty; and Stage 2 indicates not only student evaluation of teaching but also peer reviews and self evaluation.

At the time of the full-scale visit in 2008 only one college (Arts and Sciences) was at Stage 2 while the remaining six were evenly split between Stage 0 and Stage 1. By Spring 2010 all seven colleges have achieved Stage 2 status.

Probationary faculty (i.e., tenure track but not yet tenured) have all classes evaluated by students and are given a personnel evaluation every year. Tenured faculty have classes evaluated by students at least one semester per year, although most choose to have all classes evaluated, and are given a post-tenure evaluation every five years, except in the College of Technology which is every three years. Full time non-tenure track faculty are also evaluated regularly, either every year or every three years depending upon the type of appointment. Part-time faculty are evaluated in every course and on an annual basis.

**COMMENDATION: MSU Billings is to be commended for establishing in a short period a systematic evaluation of all faculty that utilizes student evaluations, peer evaluations, and self evaluation.**

## RECOMMENDATION 3: REVIEW OF MISSION AND OBJECTIVES

*“In light of the multi-institutional governance structure currently in place, whereby MSU Billings reports to the Montana Board of Regents (BOR) through MSU Bozeman, the Committee recommends that the Board of Regents and these institutions engage in a comprehensive review of the mission and operation of MSU Billings so that the distinctive identity of the institution is established, that it is clearly communicated to its constituencies, that its authority to operate within its assigned mission is ensured, and that its relationship with other Montana public postsecondary institutions is clarified.” (Standard 1.A.1, 6.A.4, 6.B.5, and 7.A.1)*

A new President of the Montana State University in Bozeman, Dr. Waded Cruzado, began her tenure in January 2010. After familiarizing herself with the MSU system, she implemented a four-campus leadership council to determine the future course of the four-campus system. The Chancellor of MSU Billings and other key university leaders are part of that council and will participate in future deliberations. President Cruzado expects to draft a statement on inter-campus governance for the Board of Regents to approve at its November 2010 meeting.

In addition, the Board of Regents has established a working group to evaluate the role of scope of the different units of the Montana University System. The report of this group is expected in mid-2010.

**CONCERN: Although the actions of the Board of Regents and President Cruzado may be steps in the right direction, at this point there is nothing concretely proposed and nothing adopted.**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4: BALANCING AVAILABLE RESOURCES**

*“Acknowledging the University’s admirable commitment to serving the higher educational needs of its region, and, moreover, the commitment of its faculty, staff, administration, and Foundation to meet that mission. The Committee nonetheless observes that resources – both human and financial – are limited, and particularly given the institution’s dependence on enrollment and the continuing demographic challenges, it recommends that steps be taken to evaluate and better match resources with mission and operations.” (Standards 1.A.4, 1.B.2, 1.B.4, 5.A.2, and 7.B.5)*

Since the full-scale visit in October 2008 the American economy has gotten worse, not better. Montana has not been immune to these pressures and the future looks bleak in that federal stimulus dollars used by the 2009 legislature to fund the Montana University System will not be available in the next biennium. In order to plan for this likelihood the university has embarked on a strategic planning process covering all divisions.

A new strategic plan for the Library has been completed. In addition, a new mission statement for the university will be forwarded to the Board of Regents for approval in May 2010. The Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs has developed a budget reduction plan to navigate the cuts that are expected in FY 2011, 2012, and 2013.

Many efforts, however, are still ongoing. These include academic college strategic plans, development of strategic goals by Student Affairs and Administrative Services, and the establishment of hiring priorities by Student Affairs and Academic Affairs.

The new mission statement explicitly notes that MSU Billings is an “urban institution” and that this mission will drive future budget decisions. Discussions with faculty suggested that they were unable to divine any differences between the old mission statement and the new one going so far as to suggest that the new mission statement does not change the factors noted in the 2008 site visit report. Faculty also were concerned that the mission statement was driven from the top down rather than as a collaborative process between faculty and administration. Administration admitted that this was the case but that faculty would be more highly involved when, as is expected, the Board of Regents returns it to campus for emendations.

Faculty were also concerned that academic departments had fewer faculty and resources now than in the past even though serving more students. This emphasizes that the university may have difficulty meeting its current mission in the future with the resources available to it. That the mission statement appears not to be significantly changed and that resources will likely not be growing suggests a future point at which this is likely to occur, absent an increase in resources or a changed mission. Leaving vacant positions open and raiding reserve accounts are not a recipe for sustainability and for achieving the mission as currently configured.

**CONCERN: There seems to be only a limited attempt to reassess the appropriateness of the mission of the university even though resources are likely to be more limited in the future than they were at the time of the 2008 report when these concerns were first raised. Leaving positions vacant, raiding reserve accounts, and other “horizontal” cuts may not be sufficient for the university to achieve its mission as currently defined.**

### **CONCLUDING STATEMENT**

Montana State University – Billings has taken the 2008 full-scale evaluation to heart and has acted quickly on many fronts to address the recommendations. The institution has achieved a great deal in a relatively short period of time and is to be commended on the seriousness with which it has addressed these issues.

Assessment. MSU Billings has adopted learning outcomes for all of its degree programs and for its General Education courses. Based on where the university was in October 2008 and where it is now, all are to be commended for working so quickly. Further, most of the programs have reached a point where assessment is occurring and positive changes in curriculum are being made in response to the gathered data. Particular praise is due to the administration for seeing the importance of appointing a (temporary) assessment coordinator to work with departments and programs to make such substantial progress. At the same time, some of the learning outcomes need to be more focused and others need to adopt valid and reliable assessment measures.

Faculty Evaluation. The university has, since the 2008 visit, adopted a systematic means of regularly evaluating all full-time and part-time faculty utilizing student evaluations, peer evaluations, and self-evaluations. It is commendable that such a system was established and implemented in such a short time period.

Governance Structure. The new President of Montana State University – Bozeman has begun a collaborative process to evaluate and recommend guidelines for inter-campus governance. At the same time a Board of Regents working group is engaging in a similar exercise. To date, however, nothing concrete has been proposed or adopted.

Mission and Resources. At the time of the 2008 report, the evaluators expressed concern that MSU Billings could continue to fulfill its mission in light of available resources. Since that time, resource issues have become more difficult and the university's stated mission does not seem to have changed in any significant way. The concerns expressed in the 2008 report do not appear to have been remediated.

## **COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**COMMENDATION #1: Montana State University – Billings has made great progress in developing learning objectives for all of its degree programs and for its General Education courses. That this has been achieved in a relatively short period time and in all programs is commendable.**

**COMMENDATION #2: MSU Billings is to be commended for establishing in a short period a systematic evaluation of all faculty that utilizes student evaluations, peer evaluations, and self evaluation.**

**RECOMMENDATION #1: Although all degree programs have established learning objectives in some degree programs these objectives are vague and unclear, thus making their measurement unreliable. In other cases the measures used to assess achievement of the learning objectives seem inappropriate.**

**RECOMMENDATION #2: Although the actions of the Board of Regents and President Cruzado to more clearly define inter-campus governance may be steps in the right direction, at this point there is nothing concretely proposed and nothing adopted.**

**RECOMMENDATION #3: There seems to be only a limited attempt to reassess the appropriateness of the mission of the university even though resources are likely to be more limited in the future than they were at the time of the 2008 report when these concerns were first raised. Leaving positions vacant, raiding reserve accounts, and other "horizontal" cuts may not be sufficient for the university to achieve its mission as currently defined and with the resources available.**