

Year One Peer-Evaluation Report

Montana State University Billings
Billings, Montana
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A confidential report of findings prepared for the Northwest Commission on
Colleges and Universities

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II. Introduction

Montana State University Billings (referenced in this report as the University) is located in Billings, Montana. It serves over 5,300 students through five colleges, and offers 70 degree options. It is one of 4 campuses of Montana State University. The University has undergone considerable leadership change since its last accreditation visit in 2008. Since this time, the University has appointed a new Chancellor; Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs; Associate Provost; several Deans (Dean of the College of Allied Health Professions, Dean of the College of Business, Dean of the College of Technology, Dean of the College of Education,); and Library Director. There have also been leadership changes at the Montana State University level with a new President and a new Provost.

The University has downsized its downtown campus and reorganized some of its colleges and administrative units, and is currently in the process of developing a strategic plan. Planning was initiated with separate plans being developed at 3 divisional levels (Academic, Student and Administrative). Planning at the institutional level will commence in fall 2011.

III. Eligibility Requirements

The University is authorized by the Montana Board of Regents to operate and award degrees as a higher education institution. Its mission statement is periodically reviewed and adopted by the Montana Board of Regents.

IV. Assessment of Self-Evaluation Report and Support Materials

The University's self-evaluation consists of 26 pages, with a web link related to 26 initiatives underway at the University. There is a listing of each core theme, and their associated indicators in the section on Standard 1.B on pages 13-22. However, it is slightly different than the list that appears in the Standard 1.A section on pages 11-12.

To further add to the lack of clarity, pages 11-12 of the Self-Evaluation Report note that the University will provide goals that support evidence for mission fulfillment of each core theme listed; however, these goals are not discussed in the section on core themes, which makes it difficult to understand how the indicators relate to each of them.

There was little provided in the way of supporting materials with the exception of the Appendix relating to 26 MSU integration initiatives and its web link.

V. Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations

a. Mission Standard 1.A.1

The University's mission statement is appropriate for an institution of higher education and provide direction for its efforts. The University's mission "has not changed since its inception as a normal school in 1927," however, the mission statement has evolved over time and a new version of the mission statement was approved by the Montana State Board of Regents (BOR) on September 23, 2010. The self-evaluation references a Memorandum of Understanding that was developed between the University and the BOR to "guide the system and the institution in developing strategic directions which reflect BOR strategic goals and overall mission of Montana State University and builds on the distinctive strengths and the leadership role that Montana State University Billings contributes to the University System." No evidence was provided in the self-evaluation of the MOU and therefore, it is not possible to judge what the BOR's expectations are in this regard .

The University's mission is easy to find on the University webpage (no link was provided in the self-evaluation). Although the self-evaluation states that the process for the 2005 review of the University's mission statement was very inclusive, no evidence is provided that the mission statement is generally understood by the University community. Nor is there evidence that the University's mission statement is widely published other than what the evaluators were able to find on the website. There are core values listed on the mission website that share some common elements and wording with the goals and core themes in the self-evaluation, but there are some differences that cause confusion as to how the core values listed on the website relate to goals and core themes.

b. Mission Standard -1A.2

The University has defined mission fulfillment in the context of its purpose and characteristics. It states that "The fulfillment of the mission is continuously demonstrated as a stronger commitment to teaching excellence, continuous quality support for individual learning, strength in the engagement of our civic responsibility, and enhancing the intellectual, cultural, social and economic sectors of local Billings and the eastern third of Montana communities." The University lists goals that relate to its four core themes and resulting indicators that they will use to determine the University's mission fulfillment.

The self evaluation states that the institution is in the process of a focused program analysis that will result in a program prioritization process in conjunction with the new university strategic plan. Since this process is underway, it is too early to tell how this will impact aspects of the mission and core themes.

c. Standard 1.B.1 Core Themes

The University has identified four core themes that individually manifest the essential elements of its mission and collectively encompass its mission. The four core themes use language that allows for a direct link to be made to the University's mission statement, however, the language used for the first two themes (1. Providing an Environment of Learning and 2. Cultivating Teaching Excellence) could be restated to better differentiate between the purposes of each. Furthermore, it is not clear what role the core themes play in University planning efforts thus far, how they impacted the divisional strategic planning efforts, and their role in University wide planning that is about to take place.

d. Standard 1.B.2 Core Themes

The University has established multiple objectives for each of the four core themes. The objectives are clear and will allow the University to put its core themes into context of its mission. Each of the objectives in turn has a list of achievement indicators that will form the basis for evaluating whether or not the objectives in the core themes are accomplished. Each indicator has a statement on relevance to the objective and a statement on the assessibility of the indicator.

The over 50 indicators, however, seem to be a collection of items rather than selective, targeted indicators. There is a lack of detail for the level of data for some indicators. For example, will student retention rates (indicator 1.2.2) be based solely on first-time full-time freshmen, other cohort measures, or individual student progress? Indicator 1.5.3 lists measuring research opportunities by individual academic departments, but there is no indication what those are and how the University will measure these with any consistency across units to get a picture of how they are meeting the objective.

There is a lack of specificity for some indicators as to how data will be collected. For example, indicator 1.3.3 identifies that career services assesses the career counseling experience, however, it does not indicate how that data is collected. It would be helpful at this stage for the University to know whether this would be through surveys, after session evaluations, etc. Another example is with indicator 2.2.4 that states that periodic review of teaching performance will be accessible through the chancellor's and provost's office as well as individual colleges and departments, but there is not a clear enough picture of what measures are planned.

Indicator 3.1.1 states that departmental and college reviews of course syllabi will provide information to assess course outcomes related to understanding and/or attitudes toward civic responsibility. Will every course syllabi be examined, and if they are, will there be an expectation that faculty who include such content in their courses explicitly state so in their syllabi? Indicator 4.4.1, donations to the community by levels of financial commitment the University makes to the

community, lists that the MSUB Foundation and Financial Services department will report this, but it is unclear what type of data they have access to or will create.

In multiple cases the indicator is based on the quantity or frequency of service provided, but not on the participation/utilization of the service. For example, indicators 1.4.1 and 1.4.2 list services provided for academic support and by the library, but do not measure utilization of those services. Indicators 2.3.3, 2.3.4, and 2.4.1 list services provided for instructors, but again no sense of how the services are utilized. Utilization data and subsequent assessment of impact, along with information on the quantity and type of services provided would be beneficial for determining whether or not the objective was met.

In some cases reference is made to data that is already collected, but it is hard to consistently tell which indicators are using data that already exists, and what new sources of data collection will need to be added.

What is lacking for some indicators is the frequency by which the indicator will be measured. For example, will NSSE data (indicator 1.2.1) be collected annually or less frequently?

There are no targets set for any of the indicators. It is suggested that the University established baseline data and set targets to measure their progress.

VI. Previous Evaluation

The University had a visit in May 2010 to address recommendations from the 2008 self-evaluation visit. Three recommendations were provided. The self-evaluation lists each of those recommendations.

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 (standard 2. B .1, policy 2.2).

The University has made progress toward this recommendation by establishing an Accreditation and Assessment Council, holding learning objective workshops, and revising learning objectives. No information was provided in the self-evaluation as to objectives and measures of achievement, making it difficult to assess if the recommendation has been fully addressed.

Recommendation 2: Although the actions of the Board of Regents and President Cruzado to more clearly define intra-campus governance may be steps in the right direction, at this point there is nothing concretely proposed and nothing adopted (standards 1.A.1, 6.A .4, 7.A.1).

There has been significant progress made on this recommendation. President Cruzado has articulated a shared vision and establish a University Council that meets on a regular basis. Together, they have developed 26 integration projects to cover functional areas across campuses and they provided evidence in the self-evaluation about each of these.

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 and other types of cuts may not be sufficient for the University to achieve its mission as currently defined and with the resources available (standards 1.A.4, 7.B.5).

The University has made some progress on this recommendation. Thus far it has downsized its downtown presence and used enrollment reserves to fill 19 vacant faculty positions and hired 10 new faculty positions. They will soon begin planning an organized, stepwise method of analyzing program strengths and weaknesses to determine programs to strengthen, maintain, or discontinue. It is unclear as a result of these changes whether or not the University mission as currently defined will change. There is also acknowledgment of significant budget reductions in the future that might impact the University's mission.

VII. Summary

The University has undergoing significant changes in terms of leadership, prioritization, and budget. The impact of these is unclear at this time and the self-evaluation points to a new strategic planning effort that will lead to effective program prioritization and budget decisions.

The University has identified a clear mission with four core themes and indicators for each theme. The mission statement appears on the University's website, however, no evidence is provided in the self-study as to whether or not the mission statement is widely published and is generally understood by its community.

Each indicator has a statement regarding how it supports the core theme, as well as a statement on assessable indicators. The indicators appear as a collection of all types of information the University is or will be collecting rather than a well defined set of key indicators that will provide the University with a clear sense of how they will be achieving their goals and core themes. There are a number of indicators that measure quality of services provided, but not utilization of those services. It is also unclear for some indicators as to the detail of data collection that will take place, how consistency across the institution will be ensured, and the frequency with which data will be collected. There are no targets and it is difficult to determine which indicators already have baseline data to measure their progress and which indicators will rely on data that currently does not exist.

VIII. Commendations and Recommendations

Compliment 1: Evaluators compliment the University for engaging in a collaborative, intercampus governance process to identify initiatives that improve the student experience and establish a methodology for continuous, coordinated analysis and improvement throughout all of the Montana State University campuses.

Concern 1: Although some of the indicators measure the quantity of service provided, consideration should be given as to how often the services are used and their impact in order to gain more meaningful achievement indicators. (Standard 1.B.2)

Recommendation 1: Although the University has a clear mission statement that is published on their website and approved by the Board of Regents, there is no evidence to demonstrate that its mission statement is widely published and generally understood by its community. The evaluators recommend that the University document and provide evidence for how the University community is aware of the mission statement and understands it. (Standard 1.A.1)

Recommendation 2: The institution has listed numerous (over 50) indicators to assess core theme, however, they appear as lists of everything that could possibly be included as opposed to key, strategic indicators. In addition, there is no mention of establishing targets by which to gauge progress. The evaluators recommend that the University examine each indicator to determine its value for measuring progress toward goals and core themes, that it establish baseline data, and that it determine appropriate targets to measure progress. (Standard 1.B.2)