Report to the Faculty, Administration, Trustees, and Students
of
Kean University
Union, NJ

By

A Team Representing the
Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Prepared After a Visit to
the Campus on
April 13-15, 2014

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INTRODUCTION

The team offers its appreciation to Kean University for hosting this follow-up visit. The team also thanks all involved in the considerable effort necessary for the preparation of the monitoring report and in responding to Third Party Comments; we are also grateful for the warm reception from all members of the Kean community and for their commitment to the accreditation process.

REASONS FOR THE VISIT

Kean University underwent its self-study in 2010 - 2011. Peer evaluators visited the institution and submitted a report to Kean, and the institution prepared its institutional response. These materials were considered by the Committee on Evaluation Reports and by the Commission at their June 2011 meetings. Following the visit, the Commission asked for a Monitoring Report due March, 2012 and placed the institution on Warning. Following that report, on June 2012 the institution was put on Probation and a monitoring report was requested, due in September 2012. Following that report and a small team visit, in November 15, 2012 the institution was deemed to be in compliance, and asked to provide a further monitor report by March 1, 2014, as noted below:

"To accept the monitoring report and the institution's response to third party comment and to note the visit by the Commission's representatives. To note that the institution is now in compliance with Standard 6 (Integrity), Standard 7 (Institutional Assessment), Standard 12 (General Education), and Standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning) and to reaffirm accreditation. To request a monitoring report due by March 1, 2014, documenting evidence of (1) steps taken by the Board to regularly review and balance the roles and relationships among multiple constituencies as well as the structures and processes through which they participate in governance, and (2) steps taken by the leadership of the various constituencies to regularly articulate a shared vision about the mission of the institution (Standard 6); (3) the development and implementation by all non-academic units of assessment processes that use substantive and direct measures to evaluate and improve outcomes related to unit as well as institutional mission and goals, and (4) the development and implementation by the University Planning Council of written procedures for the regular and systematic use of assessment results in planning, resource allocation, and institutional renewal (Standard 7); and (5) clearly articulated general education outcomes that are assessed in an organized, systematic, and sustainable manner, consistent with the institution's overall plan for assessing student learning, with assessment results that are utilized for curricular improvement (Standard 12). A visit will follow submission of the monitoring report. The Periodic Review Report is now due June 1, 2017."

Our team visit was a follow-up to this last monitoring report. Our team focused on the three Standards requested by the Commission. During the visit we met with the President, his Senior Staff, Deans, members of the Board of Trustees, the University Planning Council, Student Leadership Council, Ombudsman, leaders of the Faculty Senate, leaders of the Faculty Unions, General Education subcommittee and General Education Faculty, Task Force on Scheduling and Advising, a member of the team visited the Office of Assessment, and the team also held an open meeting for the entire campus community.

Standard 6

In the conduct of its programs and activities involving the public and the constituencies it serves, the institution demonstrates adherence to ethical standards and its own stated policies, providing support for academic and intellectual freedom.

Kean University Continues to be in Compliance with this Standard

Kean University has gone through a significant process of self-assessment and evaluation since the last Middle States Visit. As stated above, there were two requests regarding this standard.

The first asks for "steps taken by the Board to regularly review and balance the roles and relationships among multiple constituencies as well as the structures and processes through which they participate in governance."

The team met with the President, members of the Board, and the leadership of the Faculty Senate and faculty Unions and probed their understanding of the appropriate balance of Board involvement in campus life. During the last two years the Board has taken a very active role in observing campus activities. Members of the Board have been attending regularly meetings of the Senate, Student Leadership Council, and Leadership Forum. The Board also allows any interested individual to register to speak at the meetings of the board, and speakers have included faculty, students and staff. Board members have also been actively engaged in the cultural and academic life in the campus, attending and participating in numerous events.

A salient demonstration of the active role of the Board is its involvement in the development and adoption of the 2013-2020 Strategic Plan. The Board Chair tasked the Academic Policy and Programs Committee specifically with receiving updates from the University Planning Council on a regular basis. The Board Chair also reached to AGB to request materials and services to help with Board development. One of the results is the creation of the Board Governance Committee to continue enhancing the workings of the Board. The new committee will be responsible, among other issues, for new trustee mentorship, annual trustee assessment, retreats, bylaws review, and Board education.

The University also established last year the position of Ombudsman and appointed former Interim President, Dr. Frank Esposito, to the position. The Board approved the appointment in December 2013. The position, however, has not been widely announced to the campus and there was some confusion when team members asked about its role to representatives of the Faculty Unions.

The team concluded that the Board is active, involved, and committed to the success of the institution. Through their involvement in campus life they have open channels of communication that allow them to make better decisions. The Board also understands the difference between their role as policy makers and the day to day management of the university.

The second request dealt with "steps taken by the leadership of the various constituencies to regularly articulate a shared vision about the mission of the institution."

The University Planning Council (UPC) has continued to bring together a wide representation from all sectors of the campus to share in the preparation, monitoring, and assessment of the Strategic Plan. The UPC this year restructured itself into three standing committees, Strategic Plan Committee; Committee to Coordinate the Annual Review of Assessment Results in Planning, Resource Allocation and Institutional Renewal; and Annual Scorecard Committee. The new structure will help in making the UPC a stronger voice in campus governance.

The University also began a biannual Assessment Institute and Professional Development Days, a series of five consecutive days that focus on faculty development, sharing internal best practices, and fosters continuous improvement for all involved. All sessions supported one or more goals of the Strategic Plan.

The President created a Task Force on Course Scheduling and Student Advisement, comprised of faculty, students and administrators, as well as the Chair of the Faculty Senate and a representative from the Faculty Union (KFT). The task force has met thirteen times and developed new scheduling guidelines. In addition, the President meets with numerous internal and external groups.

Significant Accomplishment:

The Visiting Team commends the University and the Board of Trustees for all that has been achieved since the last visit in 2012.

The team also commends the involvement of the Board in campus life while maintaining the appropriate balance between policy making and institutional management.

Recommendation:

Kean University had achieved much over the last two years, and has opened fruitful channels of communication within the institution. We encourage the institution to continue to enhance communications among all its constituent groups.

Standard 7: Institutional Assessment

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.

Kean University continues to be in compliance with this standard.

The University Planning Council (UPC) is the primary governance structure that oversees institutional planning and assessment at Kean University. The Council has a history of varied involvement in university planning. As an outcome from previous Middle State reviews, it has been revitalized with a keen focus on institutional effectiveness over the past three years. With a combination of experienced and new Council members, supported by a well-qualified and recently hired assessment staff, they have accomplished a great deal in creating a culture of planning and systematic assessment across the University, though there is still more to do. Three subcommittees have been established to work on assessment (strategic plan progress), strategic planning, and institutional wellbeing (scorecard). The subcommittees are populated by a cross section of energetic faculty and administrators who take their work seriously and with passion, all in the name of student success.

Significant accomplishments:

- The UPC has developed a university strategic plan by incorporating elements from the prior strategic plan and the President's Vision 2020 document. Input from a broad base of constituencies was synthesized into clearly articulated goals, strategies and actions at the institutional level that supports Vision 2020.

- Processes have been established and implemented that "close the loop" between assessment and improvement in many areas of the university.

- Documents indicate new initiatives that emanate from departments and requiring funding have to be linked to department plans. Proposals that are supported by the respective Vice Presidents are presented to the UPC for review and consideration. After the evaluation by UPC (via clicker votes to preserve anonymity), recommendations are forwarded to the administration for final consideration and funding.

- A robust schedule of assessment training, through the Assessment Institute, has been established and conducted during professional development time slots. Hundreds of faculty and staff have participated in this training and each session is assessed to make improvements.

- Combined with the dedication to student success by the faculty and staff on the UPC the division of work through the three subcommittees will assure that the culture of planning, institutional renewal and resource allocation tied to planning will continue.

Suggestion:

There are many elements throughout the Kean University strategic plan that infer a commitment to institutional values such as diversity and student success without labeling as such. Often, through the strategic planning process, universities take the opportunity to conduct university-wide discussions and come to consensus on core values they feel are important for all members of the community to embrace. This creates a positive framework that the community can work within. At some point in the future, it is suggested that the UPC form another subcommittee to convene a university-wide discussion in order to build consensus on a set of core values.

Recommendation:

There has been progress made recently in the development and implementation of non-academic units of assessment related to unit and university strategic plans. There is evidence of assessment occurring in many departments, yet more needs to be done. Clear expectations for direct measures need to be standardized across all non-academic units and should be implemented by the next assessment cycle.

Standard 12 – General Education

The institution's curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competence.

Kean University continues to be in compliance with this standard.

During the last three years the General Education Committee and Kean University have accomplished a great deal. Based upon the Monitoring Report, appendices, and follow-up conversations by the visiting team it seems clear that significant progress has occurred. The committee has identified 14 Student Learning Outcomes within the General Education curriculum. Moreover all of the work of the committee is also rooted in three core areas of cognitive and affective ability: Knowledge (content), Skills, and Values. Working in a hybrid system where responsibility for general education is partially vested in an independent academic unit, the School of General Studies, and in the content disciplines, the Committee has developed a broad curriculum of general education and an assessment program to allow them to monitor the progress of their efforts. Lamentably the Director of General Education passed away unexpectedly in the summer of 2013, leaving many initiatives unsettled. Nevertheless the Committee and others concerned about general education have shouldered the load and allowed progress to continue. The discussions evidenced in the monitoring report regarding the best application of Student Learning Outcomes were particularly useful in understanding the dynamics of the process.

The General Education curriculum and assessment plan are barely three years old, and thus are only now beginning to reap the benefits of the assessment. Time will only tell if the program is completely sustainable, but at present it complies with the fundamental elements for this standard.

Significant Accomplishment:

The campus is to be commended on the thoroughness of their work and the conscientiousness of the General Education Committee in the face of some adversity.

Suggestion:

The campus needs to be ever vigilant to continue to keep the issue of general education foremost in the attention of faculty, staff and administration. While progress has been made, much remains to be done. In the subsequent periodic review, the campus should share examples of closing the loop, where the fruits of assessment in the general education program have been used to inform the future development of the program.

Recommendation:

The campus currently is working with 14 student learning outcomes. On the one hand, this level of discrimination is laudable. Unfortunately, it creates an assessment environment which is sufficiently complex as to possibly frustrate progress. The campus should seriously consider folding several of the learning outcomes together to create a slightly more streamlined assessment program in which they can use direct and indirect methods of assessment.