Standard Two: Planning and Evaluation

Description

Eastern’s planning and assessment of its programs and services is framed by multiple contexts: as a public university, and part of a four-campus system, Eastern must ensure that it is aligned with standards outlined by the State’s Department of Higher Education and with the mission of the CSU system; at the same time, of course, Eastern makes its plans and assesses its programs with an eye towards national best practices, as well. As at most public institutions of higher education, planning and assessment have moved from a peripheral to a central role at Eastern. Since the appointment of President Núñez in 2006, Eastern has developed new planning processes that emphasize broad participation, transparency, and an insistence on seeking solid data for use in decision-making.

Planning. A distinction can be drawn, for the sake of convenience, between Eastern’s short-term and long-term planning activities. See attached Visual “Strategic and Other Types of Planning at Eastern” for an overview of strategic and organizational planning. In the ordinary course of things, planning oversight, reporting, and accountability rest at the Vice-President level. Each academic and administrative unit completes an annual report outlining its goals, its plans, and its assessment activities. All units on campus rely on the Office of Planning and Institutional Research (OPIR) and the University Fiscal Office for the basic information they need to plan and assess their activities. The Office of Planning and Institutional Research, reporting to the Vice President for Academic Affairs, serves as the nexus for data collection and reporting on campus. The OPIR posts key University reports on its public website, and its staff (currently two full-time professionals) provides more specialized reports as needed—generally between 150 and 200 requests per year from various departments and offices. The Fiscal Office maintains a budget web page to assist departments and offices in planning.

Eastern has a good record of developing effective planning responses to near-term challenges and demands, drawing on the energy and expertise of faculty and staff from across the University to find solutions for sometimes unforeseeable circumstances. There is significant strength in the organization’s leadership to address fiscal challenges. There is depth of experience, comprehensive understanding of higher education and government policy, and vision coupled with pragmatic and creative problem solving abilities. During the recent fiscal crisis, the University formed an ad hoc budget committee to review Eastern’s financial condition, recommend contingency plans, and promote cost savings. That committee maintains a web site to share the most current information with the University’s employees and to engage the entire community in responding to budget constraints. Prompted in part by events on other campuses around the country, multiple offices including University Relations, Public Safety and Information Technology came together to plan and swiftly implement the University’s adoption of the MIR3 emergency notification system.

Eastern’s evolving approach to long-term planning is exemplified by the development and ongoing execution of the most recent strategic plan. The strategic planning effort was a massive undertaking that involved more than 250 faculty, staff, and students, as well as other key stakeholders, including alumni and representatives of town and state bodies. The approved plan for 2008-2013 is based on a thorough analysis of Eastern’s history, culture, opportunities, strengths, and challenges in light of the University’s mission. The strategic planning process led to the drafting and implementation of 18 initiatives designed, variously, to promote student success, to foster academic innovation, to enrich the campus culture, and to consolidate and extend the institutional resources required to underwrite Eastern’s successful pursuit of its mission. This collaborative process led to the creation of comprehensive plans outlining the University’s strategic priorities and directions, including the Physical Master Plan and the Academic, University Relations, Institutional Advancement, Diversity, and Information Technology plans.
As noted in Chapter One, the strategic planning process prompted a re-consideration and, ultimately, a re-articulation of the University’s mission. The plan’s 18 separate initiatives were identified in order to render explicit—and to develop concrete plans for achieving—goals that were felt to be implicit in that mission. The 2008-13 Strategic Plan establishes an overarching framework for all of the University’s planning activities. Its broad strategic visions have already been translated into practical plans, as with two initiatives (the Dean’s Cup and the Six Week Educational Enrichment Program [Sweep]) designed to integrate university values and engaged learning into residential life experiences. To the extent that it served to articulate a long-term vision of Eastern as a “university of first choice,” the 2008-13 plan points the University’s way forward for years to come.

**Evaluation.** In recent years, Eastern has become increasingly intent on ensuring that its decisions are grounded in the careful analysis of data. Benchmarking, especially in relation to CSUS and COPLAC peers, as well as evidence-based assessment practices are becoming commonplace at Eastern. Eastern employs a variety of evaluation processes for its programs and services. At the institutional level, annual NSSE surveys, as well as comparisons with COPLAC and CSUS peer institutions provide comparative assessment of learning contexts and outcomes. The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), begun in fall 2008, provides nationally-normed comparisons to measure Eastern’s impact on students’ critical thinking and written communication skills. Eastern and CSUS exit surveys assess students’ rating of their preparedness and plans for professional and/or graduate education endeavors. Exit surveys of some major programs provide comprehensive quantitative and qualitative measures of academic outcomes. In addition to its analysis of student attitudes and outcomes, the University also seeks to understand its employees’ perceptions through the HERI Faculty Survey and the Chronicle of Higher Education Best Colleges to Work For survey. In short, the institution seeks externally validated assessments of its effectiveness and processes.

Planning across campus is prompted and shaped by the data gathered through these various efforts. For instance, NSSE results showed that Eastern’s first-year students rated the quality of academic advising significantly lower than did students at other COPLAC institutions. This finding, in conjunction with findings about retention and graduation rates provided the impetus to seek a Project Compass planning grant and also prompted a change in University policies related to faculty advising. In keeping with its commitment to basing decisions on an examination of solid data, Eastern has become an early adopter of the Voluntary System of Accountability, which provides comprehensive information in a transparent format to the public.

Partly in response to the 2001 NEASC report, Eastern has taken steps to promote assessment across the University’s academic departments. An Assessment Coordinator position was created and filled, departments were asked to provide information about assessment of learning outcomes in annual reports, and a University Assessment Committee was created. Subsequently, the coordinator position was replaced with a faculty member (the elected chair of the University Assessment Committee) on partial reassigned time. The University Assessment Committee (UAC) continues to support internal assessment processes and stimulates participation in the CSU Assessment grant process. In early 2009 the departmental annual report template was revised to require departments to submit information about assessment in a form that was aligned with NEASC’s E-series forms. Further, in 2002-2009 departments were funded to develop new assessment plans. Outside consultants were brought in to assist in all stages of this process. Department annual reports now indicate that while approaches vary by department (including comprehensive exams, nationally-normed tests, skills assessments, writing assessments, student and employer surveys, and graduate/alumni data) the vast majority of departments have plans for assessment of student learning outcomes.

All of Eastern’s academic programs are subject to regular periodic evaluation and review. A standing committee of University Senate, the Academic Planning and Review Committee (APRC) conducts
reviews for all academic programs and majors on a seven-year cycle, focusing on the following criteria: 1. Appropriateness of the required curriculum; 2. Quality of course instruction; 3. Quality of student recruitment, advisement, and retention; 4. Incorporation of students into pre-professional settings; 5. Faculty scholarship, research, and creative activity; 6. Student learning outcomes; 7. Adequacy of program staff, facilities, and equipment.

The Academic Program Review process includes a program self-review, a review by external evaluators, and an administrative review. Some programs are subject to additional external review. The Social Work and Education programs, for example, are reviewed and accredited by The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), respectively. The new Academic Services Center is also subject to review by external evaluators, per the terms of its funding under a Nellie Mae Project Compass grant and a U. S. Department of Education Title III grant.

The Exemplary Program initiative, one of the eighteen initiatives of the 2008-13 Strategic Plan initiatives, creates a new level of programmatic review that dovetails with and extends the APRC process. This voluntary program directed by faculty establishes standards to identify exemplary academic programs for targeted strategic investment. Like the APRC review, the Exemplary Program review process will involve a program self-review, a review by external evaluators, and a review by a committee of Eastern faculty and administrators. An assessment rubric that is quite different from the one used in the past has been piloted and implementation of the Exemplary Program process will begin in Fall 2010.

Eastern’s commitment to systematically evaluating how well it is doing extends beyond the review of academic programs. The Division of Student Affairs is realigning its programs to incorporate co-curricular and academic outcomes and institutionalizing a formal assessment cycle for all services. Evaluation is linked to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and the Learning Reconsidered model that employs specific student development outcomes. Residential Life, Counseling, Health Services and AccessAbility services have all been evaluated through assessment standards that require external review.

**Appraisal**

**Planning.** University-wide planning has been systematic, integrated, and transparent throughout the organization. The direct involvement of hundreds of members of the University community in the strategic planning and implementation process has been successful on many levels. Eastern faculty and administrators came together in a collegial and democratic process to produce quality plans that were sharply focused on the University’s mission as the state’s public liberal arts university. Facilities master planning, in particular, is a continued strength of this institution. A new ten-year master plan (2008-2018) has been approved, and planning continues beyond this timeframe with approved facilities bond funds for 2020. The transparency and collaborative engagement with the campus community that the Office of Fiscal Affairs has brought to budgetary planning are also particularly noteworthy.

Planning at the program level, although adequate, has been less systematic and comprehensive. Communication of plans and assessments at the departmental level are less widely available to the campus community than for University-wide efforts. An analysis of office web sites indicates that only 33 of 68 units post mission statements and only 20 units identify goals. This is a missed opportunity to enhance planning and effectiveness at the departmental level. Currently, annual reports of planning, assessment and change activities are not shared internally and are not systematically used as a focus for institutional change, other than academic program assessment reports which are shared with the CSU system office. The revision of the annual report template for departments opens the way for more
Effective sharing and comparison among departments, however, particularly where assessment strategies and results are concerned.

Eastern has been broadly successful in implementing the plans it has made, both at the University level (e.g. master plan and strategic plan) and at the level of individual divisions, departments, and offices. The President’s emphasis on assuring the completion of the strategic plan and her dedication of resources (staff, meeting time, multiple modes of communication) to this goal were significant. Of the eighteen strategic plan initiatives, eleven were approved by June 2009 and ready for implementation for July 1, 2009. The remaining seven initiatives were approved by April 2010. There is a sound process of delegation and accountability as well as determination and shared responsibility that supports this achievement. In June 2010 a Strategic Plan Assessment Coordinator was appointed with the charge to oversee the development and implementation of assessment plans for each of the 18 initiatives and to develop and implement a plan for assessing the effectiveness of the process that was used to write, institute, and implement the overall 2008-2013 Strategic Plan.

Given the number of changes that Eastern has inaugurated in such a short period of time, however, there have inevitably been some complications. In a handful of cases, circumstances—mostly resource considerations—have led to modified or scaled-down implementations of planned initiatives: on-line course submissions for the LACC have had to be postponed, and plans for the Center for Educational Excellence and for the recreation and intramurals proposal had to be trimmed back, for instance. More seriously, however, the committees vetting the implementation of the First Year Program and the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum identified difficulties in the implementation of both initiatives. Both initiatives would have benefited from better forecasting of departments’ capacity to make faculty available for staffing the planned number of sections. Both initiatives face questions about the resources needed to support faculty and course development. Finally, neither initiative made the kind of provision for assessment that Eastern now expects of itself. These challenges led to the creation of a high-level alignment committee that made recommendations regarding new directions for implementation of these programs.

The 2008-13 Strategic Plan moved the collection and analysis of data to the center of discussion: a central feature common to all of the initiatives was an insistence on basing decisions on solid evidence, rather than on assumptions or impressions. This shift has already begun to change the way planning and evaluation are discussed at Eastern, but it also revealed gaps in the University’s capacity to collect and analyze data in the ways that the community has grown to expect of itself. Especially beginning in 2008, when numerous initiatives moved out of the planning phase and into implementation, there was a sense that the University’s data and analysis were not timely or robust enough to perceive minor changes. The Office of Planning and Institutional Research does not have sufficient staff to provide adequate answers to all questions. The OPIR should be available to provide data for planning efforts as well as technical assessment consultation and comprehensive statistical and multivariate analysis; the OPIR should, moreover, function as an open repository for all planning documents.

Despite these challenges, Eastern has developed multiple strategies to collect relevant data, ask critical questions, and build assessment into all of its initiatives, and has begun to make strides in this area. Data to support planning is becoming more readily available through on-line accessible reports. The OPIR posts much of the most commonly needed data online, and ITS has provided more staff for customized Banner reports. The Project Compass initiative offers one model for future planning and evaluation strategies. That initiative coordinated efforts among the offices of Academic Affairs, OPIR, and ITS (particularly the Banner unit), drawing on the expertise of Math, Education, and Sociology faculty to develop models for both quantitative data analysis, and making better use of data systems to inform decision-making.
Eastern’s process of institution-wide planning has become highly participatory, transparent and evidence-informed during this period, but it is clear that more needs to be accomplished at the “local” level. To meet its own standards for evidence-based decision-making, Eastern requires better data collection and analysis, improved assessment mechanisms, and better internal document sharing. Greater capacities in these areas, combined with the kind of face-to-face communication the University is already good at would facilitate more refined, aligned and rapid implementation.

**Evaluation.** Continuous efforts have been made to produce a more holistic and strategic assessment of the quality of Eastern’s educational experience. A variety of factors—including the strategic planning process, the development of the Academic Services Center, OPIR’s presentation of data from NSSE, the campus climate survey, and the administration of the Collegiate Learning Assessment—have led to greater awareness among faculty and staff of the University’s accomplishments and the challenges it faces. An assessment culture is becoming institutionalized at Eastern. According to ITS, Eastern is recognized as the leader in report development throughout the CSU System. In 2008 212 Eastern employees utilized eReports, 32,691 electronic reports were executed, and more than 260 customized reports were employed.

Evaluation activities are relatively systematic for academic departments and beginning for other areas of the University. All departments employ at least one process for assessing learning outcomes and some use up to nine methods. Significant efforts from 2007-2009 to promote department-level improvements in assessment were effective and most departments assess learning and modify programs based on findings. The CSUS Assessment Grant program, in particular, has funded approximately five projects per year since 2007, and continues to promote the growth of a culture of assessment of learning outcomes.

The depth and comprehensiveness of academic departments’ evaluation activities vary, however, and some departments lag in developing consistent and meaningful assessments. Strategies for and results of assessment are not yet shared across programs or departments in a structured or organized way beyond the assessment report, though a revision to the template for departmental annual reports should facilitate sharing and comparison of assessment strategies and results across departments. While the University Assessment Committee (UAC) has been effective in administering the CSUS Assessment grant process and in organizing assessment conferences, it has been less effective as a means of promoting assessment in programs and of sharing strategies and results.

Collaboration and infusion of knowledge about these assessment processes through the University Assessment Committee, Academic Program Review process, and the Vice-Presidents of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs is at the intermediate level. Efforts to evaluate two programs that are the responsibility of no single academic department—the First-Year Program and the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum—may hold lessons for the rest of the campus. Currently, assessment of learning in the FYP and LAC is in the experimental stages with some progress being made toward assessment in specific areas and overall through the Collegiate Learning Assessment. The UAC and the Vice President of Academic Affairs are currently reviewing the value of the CLA as a means of assessing learning outcomes in the LACC. A rubric-based approach is being considered as an alternative to be tried in 2010-2011.

The process for Academic Program Review has become more thorough, certain, and systematic, assuring comprehensive planning and assessment for all academic programs every seven years; all departments are now in compliance with this requirement. Assessment of academic programs occurs systematically for major programs, but minors are not currently reviewed by the Academic Program Review Committee. The First Year Program and the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum are so new as not yet to have gone through the program review process, but both have reviews scheduled. The FYP is scheduled for review in 2010 and the LAC in 2011, though there is a possibility that the LAC program review will be moved ahead so
that it is concurrent with FYP review. The Exemplary Program Review Process has begun a still more comprehensive assessment of academic assessment.

A focus on assessment and evaluation has spread beyond the University’s academic programs. Two co-curricular programs are considering external review and accreditation in conjunction with new facilities: the campus police (Police Officer Standards and Training Council) and the Akus Gallery (American Association of Museums). The Division of Student Affairs has already committed itself to a regular planning cycle, and to a common set of standards and expectations. Student Affairs’ assessment of its services will be tied to student development outcomes and will employ external evaluators. The Academic Services Center review will become a model for comprehensive and systematic academic program review, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

The meta-look at assessment activities is in the beginning stages – essentially at the stage of general awareness and interest in action. An assessment of the 2001-2006 strategic planning processes was conducted and process evaluation of the current planning process has begun, but the University should establish a formal process of assessing planning and evaluation. Appointment of the Strategic Plan Assessment Coordinator represents a significant step in addressing this issue. Though a culture of assessment is beginning to emerge at Eastern, assessment and planning activities are as yet still decentralized and fragmented. Increased staffing of the OPIR and additional ITS staff for customizable reporting would improve the University’s evaluation capacity, just as it would enhance the University’s planning activities. Improved communication and sharing among departments would also serve to advance the state of evaluation at the University.

**Projection**

A foundation of planning and assessment has been thoroughly implemented through the recent strategic planning effort and will likely continue to be infused throughout the institution. The new focus on student retention and graduation rates, more specific information about students within major programs, the alignment of Student Affairs with educational and student development outcomes, an assessment requirement in annual reports, and the use of nationally normed assessment instruments, such as the CLA, are expected to foster this culture. The Strategic Plan Assessment Coordinator, linking planning to assessment, will play a key role in ensuring the institutionalization of coordinated planning and assessment activities.

**Planning.** Eastern has established expectations of—and mechanisms for—broad-based involvement of the community in planning, and this trend is expected to continue. Increasing emphasis on data in reporting to external bodies including the System Office, greater use of nationally-normed assessment instruments, enhanced capacity of faculty and staff to engage in planning and assessment activities through experience and professional development and additional staffing in the OPIR will improve Eastern’s success in planning. When fiscal constraints ease enough to allow out-of-state travel, Eastern’s faculty and staff will likely begin to participate more fully with regional and national organizations and alliances (e.g. New England Resource Center for Higher Education, COPLAC, Campus Compact, LEAP/AACU), which will also facilitate planning efforts.

The coming years should bring increasing coherence to planning efforts across the University. Beginning in 2009, the standard for planning at the division and department/office levels was extended to long-term (generally four- or five-year) planning. As this long-term planning moves forward, each office will articulate goals and plans aligned with the mission, goals, and values articulated in the strategic plan. By 2013, all departments, offices, and centers will have mission statements linked to the University mission, a plan for achieving specific short and long term goals, and an articulated assessment plan. Specific assessment of implementation efforts and results will be reported in department and division annual
reports. The administrative annual report template has been revised to highlight these planning parameters, and University Relations will provide a location on the department web template for this material. Each Vice-President (or like supervisor) will be charged with facilitating this process.

Similarly, changes arising from the most recent Strategic Plan should serve to rationalize planning activities for each department and office. The committee that developed the Exemplary Program process was concerned with the alignment of requirements for that process with those for annual report and the APRC process. Moving forward, these programs will share data gathering, analysis, and reporting requirements, such that information gathered and analyzed for the annual report should readily inform a program’s application for Academic Program Review and (optionally) Exemplary Program review. The Exemplary Program strategic initiative will provide a rigorous and democratic process of program review that will raise the level of self-assessment, evaluation, and planning for all academic programs on campus. More systematic data collection and implementation of the AdAstra demand scheduling software will inform the implementation of the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum and be reported regularly to the LAC Implementation Team and the Liberal Arts Program Committee (LAPC).

Data-driven planning has become a cultural norm that will produce greater demands on the Office of Planning and Institutional Research. OPIR will require additional staff, including a permanent director and a full-time program assessment professional. New strategic plan management budgets target filling both of these positions but this is contingent on fiscal ability.

**Evaluation.** In the coming years, Eastern expects that academic assessment methods will become more robust across all departments. Promoting more comprehensive and deliberate sharing of assessment strategies and results across departments will, it is hoped, promote both a common culture of academic assessment and a pool of human and knowledge resources upon which to build more extensive assessment. The co-curricular programs within Student Affairs are expected to parallel the assessment cycle and approach of the academic programs, including the consistent use of external consultants. As a result, there will be greater alignment of co-curricular programming with the academic mission. By 2013, all academic and student affairs departments—and 80% of all University offices—will have achieved beginning level evaluation of identified long-term outcomes. The implementation of a University intranet in 2010-2011 will facilitate more systematic communication of these efforts and results.

During the next five years, a comprehensive assessment plan for the First Year Program and the LAC, as well as a holistic assessment plan for academic programs will evolve from the strategic plan proposals in each area. The Vice President of Academic Affairs, working with the Office of Planning and Institutional Research and the University Assessment Committee, will assure that relevant assessment findings will become easily accessible and employed throughout the University in decision-making.

Provided that budget circumstances allow for filling the projected positions in the Office of Planning and Institutional Research, that office will be able to increase its support to individual departments and programs in their assessment efforts by 2012. In keeping with the new Academic Plan, an enhanced OPIR would also undertake an analysis of university-wide assessment activities and effectiveness by 2013.

**Institutional Effectiveness**

Eastern has made significant strides in planning and evaluation since the last self study and will continue to move forward with the above stated goals. In the last self study (and even at the five-year mark), the lack of available data was a significant issue. We have resolved many of our data issues. The strategic planning process will continue to clarify the mission as we move forward. The current financial challenges may slow resource dependent progress somewhat.