

Guidelines for Assessment Visits to Academic Departments

Prepared by the Provost's Office, September 11, 2017

Muhlenberg College is committed to continuous improvement in all areas of our operation. Supporting this process, we have long pursued a process of visitation and assessment of individual departments.

Overarching Goals

Visiting assessment teams provide an opportunity for reflection and discussion aimed at strengthening our academic program. Departments benefit from multiple perspectives and receive informed feedback about their curricular objectives. The visiting team process is very much a partnership between the department and the members of the Team.

The spirit of these visits should be lively and informal – a shared concern for the work of the department will animate the discussions and create a collaborative environment within which the visit can take place.

Visiting teams serve four primary purposes:

1. Provide a regular opportunity for self-assessment combined with the fresh perspective of an external review;
2. Examine the objectives of the department and the effectiveness with which the department's program is meeting those objectives;
3. Assist the department in articulating its strengths and challenges;
4. Deliver a written report following the visit that includes recommendations for departmental development and progress.

Departmental Briefing Materials

The department should prepare a comprehensive self-study report to provide the visiting team with the information it needs to assess the effectiveness of the department in fulfilling its mission and to allow it to provide suggestions for departmental development. The department should particularly include material that will highlight issues the department believes will be useful in discussions with the visiting team. Departments are urged to use or modify information from their previous self-study report(s) when relevant for the current self-study.

An outline of expected briefing materials is listed in **Appendix #1**.

Team Composition

Visiting teams are composed of three invited experts from other liberal arts colleges, one of whom serves as the team leader. During the spring before the academic year in which a department will undergo an assessment review, the department should provide the Provost's Office (using the email planning@muhlenberg.edu) a ranked list of five to six experts from other institutions who would serve capably as the team leader and the other two visiting experts. Based on our history of past team visits, those individuals from institutions with

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comparable resources and similar educational missions make the best team leaders, as well of those who have experience serving on similar assessment teams at other institutions. The other visiting experts should have comparable but contrasting experience from the team leader. Pertinent professional organizations may have resources to help departments identify experienced assessment experts.

Visit Preparation

A representative of the Provost's Office will reach out to the department chair early in the spring of the academic year preceding the regularly scheduled assessment visit to request the list of proposed team members. The Provost will select the team members, reach out to them to secure their participation, and Office staff will work with the team and the department chair to identify the visit date.

The Provost's Office will coordinate travel and accommodations for the visiting team; coordinate all meeting logistics; issue all meeting invitations and track responses. The President's Office will pay honoraria to visiting team members and fund housing and travel expenses.

No later than six weeks prior to the visit date, the department chair must submit all briefing materials digitally to the Provost's Office (using planning@muhlenberg.edu). Questions concerning briefing materials and visit planning and logistics should be directed to the Provost's Office.

No later than five weeks prior to the visit date, the department chair must submit the following lists to the Provost's Office (planning@muhlenberg.edu):

1. Department personnel the team will need to interview, along with any conflicts faculty and staff may have on the meeting day;
2. Students (a list of at least 24; 30 is better) who are majors, minors, or interact with the department in meaningful ways;
3. Faculty and staff who interact with the department and who can speak to the department's strengths and challenges (this list can be as large or small as is necessary);
4. Depending on the department, lists of alumni or community partners the team should interview, as well; *this is not a requirement of all departments.*

The Campus Visit

The team prepares for its visit by reviewing briefing materials prepared by the department in consultation with the Provost's Office. During the visit, team members meet with the president, the provost, the department chair and appropriate members of the department, as well as other administrators, faculty and/or students as appropriate. Meetings are intended to be collaborative and conversational in tone and format.

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Day One: the department chair will attend an initial dinner with the visiting team, the president and provost. No one else from the department attends this dinner.

Day Two: the team meets over breakfast with the entire staff of the department early in the morning, then meets with staff individually or in small groups through the morning and early afternoon (if necessary) on the meeting day. The Provost's Office will work to tailor the interview schedule to avoid any conflicts faculty and/or staff may have.

The team will meet over lunch with students who interact with the department in meaningful ways. A list of up to 30 students is ideal, as many may have class conflicts. Inviting 30 usually yields 12-16, which is a good group for a conversation.

The team meets in late afternoon with campus-wide colleagues (faculty and/or staff) of the department's choosing with whom it interacts in a meaningful way. This list can be as large or as small as is necessary, but remember that not everyone who is invited may be available to attend a meeting.

The team has dinner with the entire department at the end of the second day. This is considered a working dinner, where the results of the day's interviews are discussed and the team can ask questions of department members.

Day Three: this is the team's work day; under normal circumstances, no one from the department needs to be available on the work day. The team will meet with the Provost for an oral report at mid-morning of the workday. The Provost will then relay the results of the oral report to the president and department chair.

Other visit schedule models have proven successful for much larger or relatively small departments; department chairs should consult with the Provost's Office if they would like to discuss an alternate visit schedule.

After the visit concludes, the team leader, in cooperation with the other two visiting experts, prepares a report. Normally this report is submitted to the provost within three weeks of the visit. The provost will share the report with the president, and department chair. The department then has three weeks to prepare a brief response to the report.

After the Visit

The department chair should reach out to express her/his gratitude to all non-departmental interviewees.

The department should receive the team's written report (guidelines for which are listed in **Appendix #2**), which addresses the questions described in the guidelines, approximately three

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weeks following the visit. Within three weeks of receipt, the department should meet to discuss the report, prepare a brief response that responds to the main points made in the report, and share that response with the President and Provost.

The department should then express their gratitude to the members of the team for their work on the visit and report.

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APPENDIX #1

Sample Outline for an Academic Self-Study Report

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Provide a 1-2 page overview of the briefing report.

Overview

Provide an introduction to the department summarizing the recent history of the program and any significant changes that occurred in staffing or curriculum in the past six years. Outline the department's mission, goals, and learning outcomes and how they relate to the mission of the College and to national standards in the discipline (documents outlining national standards could be put in a separate document box).

Progress on Recommendations from Previous Visiting Team Report

Departments should review the previous visiting team report and provide a brief update addressing the status of recommendations in the report.

Curriculum

Describe the curriculum and give a brief history and rationale for recent revisions. Include syllabi in a separate document box.

Faculty

Provide information about each faculty member (education, specialization, what they teach, what research they do, their recent college service), as well as a current vita for each faculty member.

Advising

Outline how major/minor advising is managed in the department. You might want to include information on the number of majors/minors for the past 6 years and the average advising load per faculty member in the department.

Department's contribution to College initiatives and Interdisciplinary programs

Provide evidence of how the department contributes to:

1. General Education Requirements
2. First Year Seminars
3. Writing Courses
4. Service Learning Initiative
5. Honors Programs (Dana, RJ Fellows, Muhlenberg Scholars)
6. Diversity
7. Interdisciplinary majors/minors
8. June Advising
9. First Year Advising
10. Other

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Resources/Facilities

Describe department resources (budget, classrooms, lab space, equipment, computer labs, library resources) and evaluate their quality in light of the department's mission, current work, and the College's overall resources.

Student- Faculty Work and Interaction

Provide information about the type and number of independent studies/research, Honors projects, and internships (Individualized Instruction).

Describe department clubs and other events that foster student-faculty interaction.

Common Data Set (provided by Director of Institutional Research)

Number of majors and minors for the past 6 years compared to % declared majors/minors.

Course enrollments for the past 6 years.

Total enrollment for the past 6 years compared to % day college enrollment.

Please send requests for additional data to the Director of Institutional Research.

Program Assessment

Summarize the department's assessment plan.

Provide results of assessment measures (if available) and interpret these findings in light of the department's mission and goals. Copies of surveys, rubrics, student work etc. can be put in an Appendix. Sample measures include:

- Student and alumni surveys

- Portfolio assessments

- Embedded course assessments (exam questions, final papers etc.)

- Capstone experience work

- National exams and/or local exams to assess discipline knowledge

- Alumni post-graduate information

Department Goals

Outline the department's goals for the next 8 years.

Strengths/Weakness

Summarize the department's strengths and weakness and note any specific concerns the department has in regard to its ability to fulfill its current mission and goals.

All briefing materials should be submitted **digitally**; if it desires, the department may prepare a briefing box of materials that may not be easily digitized and make it available to the team when it arrives.

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Appendix #2

General Guidelines for Visiting Team Reports

The goal of the external review is to help departments maintain their current strengths and identify opportunities for growth and improvement. The review also provides departments the opportunity to reassess their goals, directions, and strengths in teaching, research, and service. The team visit should focus on administrative, operational and programmatic functions of the department and not on the strengths or weaknesses of any one individual.

The visiting team report is based on a review of the department's self-study report and supplemental materials, as well as information acquired through meetings with department faculty and staff, students, and faculty affiliated with the department. Visiting team members do not observe classes or evaluate individual faculty or student work.

The team report should address:

1. The extent to which the department's mission and goals are aligned with the College mission.
2. The effectiveness of the department in fulfilling its mission and goals.
3. The extent to which the structure and offerings in the department are consistent with national trends in the discipline.
4. The extent to which department resources meet needs and are being used effectively.
5. The extent to which the department's future goals are reasonable given its mission and the College mission.

The team report should include:

1. An explanation of the procedures followed by the visiting team.
2. An evaluation of the evidence included in the Self-Study.
3. An outline of the strength and weaknesses of the department.
4. Recommendations about curriculum, resources, and internal operations of the department where appropriate.

The team leader should ensure that the report has not:

1. Been written in a highly prescriptive manner
2. Named individuals, either in praise or blame
3. Focused on trivial issues.
4. Suggested changes that necessitate a significant increase in resources (including additional staffing).
5. Advocated the personal educational theories of any of the team members.