

Report to Faculty, Administrators, Trustees, Students
of

Muhlenberg College
Allentown, Pennsylvania

Prepared following analysis of the institution's
Periodic Review Report

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Evaluation of the Periodic Review Report of Muhlenberg College

I. Introduction

Muhlenberg College, a private liberal arts institution located in a residential area west of Allentown, Pennsylvania, was founded as Allentown Seminary in 1848 by the Lutheran Ministerium and renamed Muhlenberg College in 1867. It was first accredited by Middle States in 1951. Its mission is “to develop independent critical thinkers who are intellectually agile, characterized by a zest for reasoned and civil debate, knowledgeable about the achievements and traditions of diverse civilizations and cultures, able to express ideas with clarity and grace, committed to life-long learning, equipped with ethical and civic values, and prepared for lives of leadership and service.”

The College’s Strategic Plan (“The Talents Entrusted to Our Care, 2004-2009,” hereafter *TETOC*) has been followed by a new version (“Momentum: Muhlenberg’s Strategic Plan 2010-15,” hereafter *Momentum*). A period of new planning was followed by a period of accomplishments, including a successful capital campaign, renovation of academic and residential facilities, and continued strong enrollment. Existing opportunities have been strengthened, and new opportunities have been added.

The Periodic Review Report (PRR) provides a comprehensive overview of the College since its decennial self-study and team visit in 2006. The process of the PRR’s creation was sound and transparent: the co-chairs of the 2006 Self-Study were drafted to chair the PRR Committee, the members of which include seven members of the President’s Planning Group. A draft was made available for constituencies of the college to review and offer feedback.

The report as a whole is thoroughly researched, carefully written, and well documented (including 144 pages of appendices). The Executive Summary rehearses the background of the college, discusses the PRR process, identifies five ‘milestones’ since the 2006 Self Study, and previews the contents of the its four chapters. All of the areas identified in the Handbook for Periodic Review Reports (12th edition) are covered in full. The Readers **commend** the PRR Committee for the quality of the report.

II. Responses to Recommendations from the Previous Decennial Evaluation

This section summarizes the College’s responses to the recommendations it offered in its Self-Study and to the decennial report prepared by the Middle States Visiting Team in 2006. The PRR throughout is highly responsive to the report of the Visiting Team. While the Visiting Team found Muhlenberg to be in compliance with all 14 standards, and in fact offered no requirements or recommendations, the PRR Committee was eager to respond to all the points it raised in its report. Accordingly, the PRR Committee “treated suggestions as recommendations” and discusses these suggestions at length. The result is perhaps a longer report than need have been the case, but also a richer and more detailed one. PRR responses to the Self-Study and were organized by Standards.

Standard 2. Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal.

Regarding the College’s Strategic Plan for 2004-2009 (*TETOC*), the 2006 Visiting Team noted that “by the time of the next Periodic Review Report, the college should have enough experience to evaluate both the process and its results.” The Strategic Plan, clear in its broad strategic priorities, was operationalized through a process that involved ongoing review and modification with changing circumstances, so that resources would be aligned with strategic priorities. Its budget model was reviewed and updated

annually, and at about the half-way point of the five year plan, a newly reconvened President's Planning Group (PPG) undertook a major review of the strategic plan and strategic planning documents, with the participation of other campus constituents. This review led to budget adjustments and revision of goals where necessary. The academic year 2009-2010 concluded the implementation of the 2004 *TETOC* Strategic Plan, and the Strategic Initiatives Progress Report August 2009 was posted on the College's Strategic Planning webpage, providing a thorough and comprehensive analysis of goals achieved, deferred, or revised. The strategic planning process thus involves an assessment program that includes the assessment of the goals themselves, the assumptions on which the financial model is based, the College's progress in implementation, and the effectiveness of the initiatives in actually achieving the stated goals.

In 2009, a new President's Planning Group was assembled to develop a new strategic plan. As with the 2004 Strategic Plan process, membership of the group was broadly consultative, involving faculty, students, managerial, support and service personnel, and the senior staff of the College. The resulting plan, "*Momentum: Muhlenberg's Strategic Plan 2010-2015*," approved by the Board of Trustees in 2010, provides a fiscally conservative budget model, based on assumptions of continued growth and success of fundraising efforts, and no increased debt. The Plan aims to strengthen the quality of the educational experience provided to students, enrich diversity, and improve efficiency and sustainability. Whereas the implementation of the 2004 *TETOC* Strategic Plan saw the expansion of facilities, faculty and staff positions, and curricular and experiential learning opportunities, *Momentum* aligns resources and priorities through an emphasis on strategies designed to strengthen infrastructure, on integration and improvement of existing programs, and implementation of cost-saving measures. In its assessment of the 2004 Strategic Plan, the PPG notes the overall success of the *TETOC* plan, pointing to its comprehensive fundraising campaign which exceeded target goals, the expansion and improvement of campus facilities, and its improved "win rate" in a highly competitive admissions market. Additionally, in the *Momentum* Strategic Plan, the PPG describes how it will annually monitor and evaluate the budget assumptions and strategic goals, as well as to report progress annually on the strategic planning website, as it did for the 2004 Strategic Plan. Muhlenberg is to be **commended** for the collaborative and transparent process it has implemented for developing and communicating its Strategic Plan.

With specific reference to Resource Allocation, see Section VI below (Linked Institutional Planning and Budgeting Processes).

Standard 3: Institutional Resources

Both the Self-Study and the Visiting Team raised questions about (a) employee work load and compensation and (b) support for technology. In response, the College developed a Compensation Philosophy, for both faculty and staff, which identifies competitiveness, equity, and performance as key guiding principles. In keeping with this philosophy and in alignment with *TETOC Strategic Plan*, (a) processes for salary review and adjustments have been improved and regularized and support staff allocations increased for a number of academic and administrative offices. For (b), the College's technology committee has established a better process for soliciting input from across campus. In 2010 College added, somewhat belatedly, a second position in instructional technology and has determined to monitor more regularly the staffing resources it devotes to IT as compared to peer institutions—an important step forward in ensuring that these operations are adequately supported and one that the Readers applaud.

Standard 4: Leadership and Governance

The Board and President discussed several changes in the by-laws suggested by the Visiting Team but decided to retain the status quo. The PRR outlined additional ways in which faculty and others are included in important processes (budget and facilities planning). Suggestions from the Visiting Team that divisional structures be strengthened (e.g., by Division Chairs) were discussed but found little support among faculty. Given the faculty culture and the need for interdisciplinary and cross-divisional initiatives, this seems the wiser course. The College is to be **commended** for discussing these potentially contentious changes.

Standard 5. Administration.

In addition to concerns about technology staffing (above, Standard 3), the Visiting Team expressed concerns about the evaluation of faculty who exercise administrative functions. The Provost has now established a process for the annual evaluation and future goal-setting of department chairs and center directors.

Standard 7. Institutional Assessment. See below, Section 5.

Standard 8. Student Admissions.

Spurred by the Strategic Planning process, the College has strengthened data gathering in enrollment and retention and is monitoring more closely than before the persistence (retention and graduation) of different student populations, including students with disabilities, students of color, and SAT-optional students. The College has also changed its thinking on the suggestion (made in the Self-Study and the Visiting Team report) to limit enrollment via Early Decision, preferring instead to use ED to build a solid base before moving to the less predictable spring admissions cycle—understandable given the degree to which the College is tuition driven and the volatility of the current admissions world. With the help of an outside firm, the website has been redesigned, Admissions publications redesigned to complement the web site, a New Media position added to Public relations, and web materials now feature the College's multicultural students more prominently.

Standard 9. Student Support Services.

With the appointment of a new VP/Dean of Student Affairs, there has been an explosion of activity across offices and programs: Multicultural Life, Career Development and Placement, Registrar, Student Health Services, Counseling Services, Leadership and Greek Life, Student Activities, Residential Services. The range of new initiatives, most of them identified in the Self-Study, was anchored in an assessment of current operations (as the Self-Study had recommended) and by a new unit mission statement—reflecting the Visiting Team's observation that the approach needed to be "cohesive." The partnering of the Associate Dean for Institutional Assessment with the Division of Student Life has generated a rich set of data-informed decision-making leading to significant improvements in student life programming. The results of five years' efforts are extensive and well chronicled, department by department, in the PRR. They speak for themselves and suggest nothing short of a transformation of student services. The Readers **commend** the College for this success.

Standard 10. Faculty.

The Visiting Team raised a range of faculty-related issues: (a) that better use could be made of support staff; (b) that scholarly activity was not sufficiently prioritized; (c) that faculty workload was distributed inequitably and that the College needed to study "actual faculty workload"; (d) that the service of long-

term adjuncts should be recognized with a salary differential; (e) that salaries of full-time faculty need to remain competitive with those of peer institutions. The PRR details how the College has addressed these issues:

(a) Additional secretarial support has been allocated in critical academic areas.

(b) The faculty have adopted new language in the Faculty Handbook that strengthens the importance of scholarship and professional activity, and junior faculty have been given more direction in setting their academic priorities.

(c) The College considered, but decided against changes in the way committee service was assigned. It has agreed to examine the process by which advising loads are assigned.

(d) Department chairs reviewed the processes by which adjunct faculty are evaluated. They observed that a pay differential for adjuncts should be based on performance rather than on seniority, but also insisted that they were not in a position to offer the level of observation and evaluation required for this. Long-term adjuncts might also be offered support for development, and a plan for cost-sharing this additional expense is being developed.

(e) The College has identified as a “top priority” establishing the salaries of faculty in the top quintile of the Carnegie IIB Group.

Standard 11. Educational Offerings.

In addition to concerns about instructional technology (above, Standard 3), the Visiting Team stressed the importance of articulating “student learning/development outcomes for the entire institution.” The College notes here and in several other places in the PRR that while the faculty did approve new general education goals in December 2009 (Appendix 1.11, General Education Mission and Learning Goals), the faculty did not approve the subsequent general education proposal voted on in December 2010. Accordingly, “the institution plans to map those goals to evaluate alignment with the current curriculum.” The Readers view this situation with great concern, given the real possibility that the newly approved general education goals may be inconsistent with the current requirements. Apart from the ‘disconnect’ between the two domains, this situation would appear to make the assessment of the current general education requirements extremely problematic: against what set of goals is student learning to be measured? Moreover, the PRR inadequately addresses interrelationships among institutional, program-level, and course-level learning outcomes. The Readers **recommend** that the College 1) dedicate sufficient resources to articulating student learning outcomes at all levels and for all programs, and 2) make bringing the general education curriculum and the general education mission and learning goals into alignment a high priority.

Standard 12. General Education.

The Visiting Team addressed other issues related to general education, including (a) the need for a senior capstone experience, (b) the need to evaluate the place of information literacy, oral expression and technological competence in the curriculum, and (c) the need to evaluate the current Skills and Perspectives requirements. Since 2006 the College has addressed these topics carefully and systematically. It has used the opportunities provided through the Teagle consortial grant to assess student experience in existing capstone courses and NSSE data to gauge the extent to which students regard their senior experience in the major as a capstone or culminating experience. Trexler Library has redoubled its efforts, already considerable, on behalf of information literacy activities in support of the curriculum, and the College administered the HEDS Research Practices Survey to better understand

students' proficiencies in and attitudes toward information literacy. The new general education proposal that was taken to the faculty for a vote included a required senior capstone requirement and the expectations that all programs would incorporate information literacy and oral communication skills into their programs. Although that proposal failed, efforts are currently underway to adopt these specific curricular features into the general education curriculum in a more piecemeal fashion.

Standard 13. Related Educational Activities.

The Visiting Team noted that the College might consider giving academic (service-learning) credit for some student volunteer work. The Self-Study noted that (a) more resources needed to be allocated to instructional opportunities outside the classroom; (b) co-curricular planning needs to be better coordinated; (c) strategies need to be developed to encourage more male students and low-income students to study abroad; (d) students enrolled through the Wescoe School may not be having an experience fully equivalent to the day college. Measures have been taken in all three areas: (a) Service-learning courses have increased significantly (though a proposal to establish a community-based learning certificate was not approved), and support has been increased for summer student-faculty research. (b) A number of residentially based living-learning experiences has been developed. (c) The College has reviewed the data on the relationship between financial aid and study abroad. The Office of Global Education will track study abroad applicants who receive Pell grants to help them identify additional funding to support study abroad. (d) A range of measures are in place to ensure the quality of experience for Wescoe School students, including rubrics to assess the achievement of student teams in their capstone projects. However, assessment of individual student learning for Wescoe School students is not manifest in the PRR, leading to the **suggestion** that the College provide evidence that individual Wescoe School students, as well as teams, are achieving key institutional and program learning outcomes.

Standard 14. Assessment of Student Learning. See Section V, below.

III. Major Challenges and/or Opportunities.

Analysis of challenges and opportunities was a part of the planning for the President's Planning Group's development of the 2010-15 Strategic Plan. Challenges include (a) achieving enrollment goals, despite the economic downturn, price resistance to the cost of private education, and an increasingly competitive recruiting environment—while still controlling the discount rate (which is 10% below the national average); (b) anticipating changes in students' educational goals, as they become more vocationally driven; (c) preparing for a growth in the number of students with special needs. The Readers **suggest** careful monitoring of its increasing enrollment of students with special needs to ensure that adequate staff is in place to support student learning. On the other hand, the College recognizes new opportunities to (a) reaffirm its core values, mission and identity as it recasts its general education curriculum; (b) enhance academic rigor (required Senior Capstone); (c) strengthen experiential learning opportunities through earmarking internal and external funds; and (d) increase diversity. In response to the fact that these populations often require greater financial need, the College has successfully identified new external sources of support.

IV. Enrollment and Finance Trends and Projections

The College does not plan for an increase in the size of the student body, and its budgetary projections for the four years beginning 2012-13 are based on continuing day enrollments of 2,180 (slightly less than the actual day enrollments for the last three years). The operating budget has grown on average by 5.8% from 2006-2007 to 2010-2011; financial aid as a part of the budget increased from 21.2% to 22.8%

Endowment has grown from \$88.3M in 2004 to \$126.5M in 2010. Net assets have increased by 18.1% since June 30, 2006. The College has an A+ credit rating from Standard & Poor's. While they have achieved significant growth in their endowment, they are low within their benchmark group. The College uses conservative budget models that allow for fluctuation: the revenue budget is built on the projected enrollment less fifty students, to allow for sudden dips in enrollment or increases in financial aid. The College justly takes pride in its historical record of achieving a balanced budget for fifty-five consecutive years.

Regarding 'Resource Allocation' (PRR pp. 44-45), see Section VI below (Linked Institutional Planning and Budgeting Processes).

V. Assessment Processes and Plans

Assessment process and plans are discussed in the PRR in three places: (a) Chapter 2, 'Standard 7: Institutional Assessment'; (b) Chapter 2, 'Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning'; and (c) in Chapter 4, 'Institutional and Student Learning Assessment.'

The College has been very responsive to the questions raised by the Visiting Team and its own Self-Study regarding assessment. The appointment of the Associate Dean for Institutional Assessment indicated seriousness of purpose, and the new position, which works closely with Director of Institutional Assessment, serves to anchor the College's efforts in these areas. The appointment has been followed by a coordinated series of new policies and programs that has gone a long way toward establishing a 'culture of assessment' where previously there had been none. This included consultation with academic and administrative units across the College, the development of goals and assessment plans to measure progress toward them, training in methods and best practices of assessment, and the collection and analysis of assessment data from recognized national instruments and special assessment projects in which the College participates (NSSE, HEDS, Mellon Sports Grant, Teagle Grant to assess intentional learning). The results of these assessments are disseminated to the higher levels of administration and relevant committees, though it is not clear whether they are always filtering down to the faculty and other levels of administration.

On the administrative side, assessment practices are firmly established. As noted above in regard to Standard 2, the entire strategic planning process is undergirded by continuing assessment: the goals themselves are developed through the collection and analysis of internal and external data; and the Strategic Plan itself is assessed annually through a four-fold plan. Assessment efforts in the area of Student Affairs have been particularly vigorous, with results that are being used to inform changes and program revisions. Areas of administrative assessment range from technology structure and wireless coverage to several diversity initiatives. Most of the offices that are under the various deans for student affairs and academic life now have assessment plans in place, and many of their various programs, from orientation to learning assistants to disabilities services, have undergone assessment. Assessment practices have also taken hold in Admissions and the Office of Global Education. Most impressively, since 2004 all academic departments *and* all administrative offices have undergone a process of departmental review that includes a self-study and a group of visitors—as evidenced by the outline of the reviews and their results (Appendix 4.2). The College is to be **commended** for its comprehensive implementation of a system of observers whose feedback promotes continuous improvement and accountability.

There is also progress to report on the academic side, though there are also areas for concern. All academic departments have identified learning goals, developed assessment plans, and conducted indirect assessments. It is widely accepted among 'best practices' in assessment that student learning

must be assessed through both direct and indirect means. While there is a good deal of activity to assess student learning, assessment primarily takes the form of indirect assessment and relatively little evidence has been gathered to measure just what students are learning against what the programs expect them to learn. It is encouraging to read that “several [departments] have integrated direct assessments into capstone or required major courses and many more are in the process of developing embedded assessments and rubrics to evaluate student work” (p. 47), but all departments should by now have gathered both indirect and direct assessments. The Readers **recommend** that the college establish clear timelines for addressing the assessment challenges that are identified in the PRR (Standards 7, 12, and 14).

The Visiting Team acknowledged the need for “direct measures of student learning outcomes” that sampled student work across the institution and not just in specific programs. The work supported by the Teagle consortial grant was an important step forward in several ways. It enabled them not only to assess intentional learning by the direct evaluation of student work, especially in relation to writing and senior capstone courses, but also to engage 30 faculty from a range of departments in the process, providing them with valuable experience and training. This in turn informed the development of the proposal for new general education requirement. Additionally, the HEDS Research Practices Survey measure students’ perceptions of their research and information literacy skills (indirect) against their actual knowledge (direct). These assessment practices can and should model others.

Assessment of learning goals for general education as a whole is problematic—see above Section II Standard 11 (Educational Offerings). As noted, the possible inconsistency between the newly approved student learning goals and the current general education requirements would appear, given the failure of the new general education curriculum proposal, to pose serious challenges for assessment.

VI. Linked Institutional Planning and Budgeting Processes

The College has made enormous progress in linking institutional and strategic planning to the budget process. The process of budget formation underwent a significant change at the time of the decennial review (2006). Previously the Budget Advisory Committee (BAC)—following review of the current budget, presentations by various entities and anticipated needs for the following year—was responsible for making budget recommendations directly to the President, including macro budget increases such as tuition, room and board, and salary pools.

This model has been replaced by one in which the BAC uses as its starting point a budget model that is prepared by the President’s Planning Group (PPG), following a review of materials and presentations, and it is then sent to the BAC. There are several ways in which this model helps to ensure that institutional and strategic planning are fundamental starting points to the process of budget formation: (a) as noted above (Standard 2), the PPG is the group involved with the creation, review and (as appropriate) revision of the Strategic Plan, as well as the budget model assumptions on which the plans are based; (b) four of the eight members of the BAC are also members of the PPG.

The President, together with the financial officers of the College, then prepares a budget for approval by the Board Finance and Investment Committee and the full Board. Only then is budget building material distributed to department heads and the final, detailed budget prepared and at this stage, again, departments are guided by the strategic plan as they discuss internally the requests they recommend to the President. The President reviews these departmental requests again to ensure that the requests are in alignment with the strategic plan and the initiatives that have been prioritized.

VII. Conclusion

Muhlenberg College, despite a turbulent economy and a changing student demographic, is moving briskly ahead due to sound fiscal and management practices and its ability to offer a strong educational experience that is valued by its students. It employs a broadly consultative process in strategic planning and resource allocation, and the Periodic Review Report underscores its commitment to regular assessment of its progress toward achieving institutional goals.

Significant commendable progress has been made on development and implementation of assessment practices across the institution, demonstrating that the Muhlenberg College is clearly achieving its mission and goals. Through its creation of an Office of Institutional Assessment, training and development of faculty, and administrative support, the College is well on its way toward establishing a true “culture of assessment.” However, a complete and integrated student learning outcomes assessment plan has not been fully operationalized and must be completed.

In summary, Muhlenberg College’s 2011 Periodic Review Report describes a high quality institution, sure of its mission to provide a top-notch education to its students, and one that is well-poised to meet the challenges of the future.

The recommendations made above are repeated here:

1. The Readers **recommend** that the College 1) dedicate sufficient resources to articulating student learning outcomes at all levels and for all programs, and 2) make bringing the general education curriculum and the general education mission and learning goals into alignment a high priority.
2. The Readers **recommend** that the college establish clear timelines for addressing the assessment challenges that are identified in the PRR (Standards 7, 12, and 14).