September 18, 2012

Dr. David Reinhold, Associate Provost
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49009

Dear Dave,

The College of Arts and Sciences Assessment Report for 2012, included below, addresses the strengths and weaknesses of each reports submitted by CAS units for the 2011-2012 academic year. As you know, the college is behind schedule in our assessment reporting due to personnel changes in the Dean's office. While we regret the lateness of this report and the lack of data for this cycle, we are in the process of instituting a number of important changes related to assessment that will strengthen our current efforts and which will be reflected in future reports. These include:

- Instituting new deadlines and procedures to ensure timely reporting of assessment data from all units in the college;
- Departmental and College-wide workshops dedicated to using TracDat and updating unit assessment plans;
- Implementation of CAS assessment grants to match units awarded an Assessment Fellows grant from your office; and
- Explicit inclusion of assessment data in all academic program reviews and as criteria in future resource allocations.

We believe that these measures will dramatically improve the quality of assessment in the college. As discussed, CAS will provide a supplemental assessment report to you no later than August 1, 2013, that provides updates on unit assessment reports and on the initiatives described above.

A. Summary of Assessment Reports

For 2012, only five of twenty-five units submitted assessment reports. As noted above, this is in part due to the temporary absence in the college of an Associate Dean dedicated to assessment, a situation that has now been rectified. Our goal for next year's report is to have 100% of units submit assessment reports. The following units submitted reports for 2012: Anthropology, Geography, History, Physics, and Political Science.

B. Summary of Key Findings for Each Report:

1. Anthropology - The Department of Anthropology uses a portfolio-based approach to undergraduate majors, reviewing the portfolios in alternate years. Since 2012 was not an active year for this review, the majority of the report is dedicated to graduate education, data for which is gathered primarily through a survey of students. The department has
determined that its current survey does not provide an adequate basis to assess whether or not graduate students in the program are meeting learning outcomes related to understanding research ethics and methodologies. The college will follow up with next year's report to ensure that the portfolio review has been completed and that the department has revisited the current survey for graduate students.

2. Geography – The Department of Geography uses passing rates in core classes such as GEOG1050, 2650, and 3030 to assess most of its undergraduate learning outcomes. While the reliability of this data for effectively measuring learning outcomes is questionable, the data for this year shows that students in these classes (several of which are General Education courses) are passing at high rates. At the graduate level, the department used completion rates for M.A. theses to assess its graduate learning outcomes. While the usefulness of this data is similarly limited, the completion rates were again positive. The department has a number of more thoughtful, comprehensive means of assessment identified in its plan, including undergraduate portfolios and alumni surveys, but does not indicate when those tools will be used. Following up next year, we will encourage the department to clarify when other outcomes will be measured and to reflect on whether passing rates in large introductory courses are useful tools for assessing the learning outcomes in their multiple programs.

3. History – The Department of History completed assessment for each of its eight learning outcomes, in both undergraduate and graduate education. Using data from the MTTC, it identified ongoing success for secondary education students (as compared with state averages) and ongoing concerns about the lack of content knowledge among elementary education majors. The department worked with the College of Education and Human Development to develop a new course, taught for the first time in Summer II, targeted at improving historical content knowledge for this population. The department also refined its student satisfaction survey to be more comprehensive and to include a much larger sample size. The survey showed a high level of satisfaction among history majors, with 100% of students reporting that their academic and professional needs were being “mostly” or “somewhat met” by the department. Finally, at the undergraduate level, the department found modest improvements in results from the Professional Proficiency Exam administered every semester to upper-level students. While students still often fail to score in the highest categories on this exam, the number of those scoring in the “very weak” category dropped from seven to zero. Most importantly, the department continues to implement assessment-driven reforms at both the undergraduate level. This year, the department completely overhauled its Ph.D. curriculum in moving to a portfolio-based approach that it believes will increase rigor, reduce time to degree, and better prepare students for multiple career paths. At the undergraduate level, the department ran a pilot project to determine whether a portfolio-based system would provide a better means of assessing the improvement of student writing over the course of their time in the program. The department will continue to explore this option, along with a portfolio-based system for its MA students, during the 2012-13 academic year. The college will follow up on these developments for the 2013 assessment report.

4. Physics – The Department of Physics used a variety of qualitative and quantitative tools to assess its undergraduate learning objectives. These include comparing WMU students
with national results for the Major Field Test in Physics. WMU students this year scored higher than 70% of other institutions. The department also collected a number of reports from faculty about the ability of students to meet outcomes in such areas as laboratory and computer skills and oral and written communication. While the data here is somewhat inconsistent from different faculty in different classes, the overall picture is that students are adequately meeting outcomes for basic laboratory skills and for oral and written reports presented to the department. The one major shortcoming of the Physics report is that there are currently no outcomes listed for graduate education. The college will follow up with the department to ensure that graduate program assessment is included in future reports and to determine what, if any, changes are being made to deal with some concerns expressed about students' ability to meet outcomes in several of these areas.

5. Political Science – The Department of Political Science used a survey of senior students and alumni to assess thirteen of its twenty-six learning outcomes. While data in some areas show that students believe that department courses prepared them well in areas such as “evaluating policy alternatives,” and “familiarity with political systems outside of the United States,” the use of this one tool may be less effective in assessing the multiple student outcomes listed in the plan, which also includes other means of assessment, such as writing portfolios and course-embedded questions. The college will follow up with the department for its 2013 report to determine whether the current plan and assessment tools might be simplified or streamlined to provide more comprehensive data.

Summary and Plan of Action
As the above indicates, we have some work to do to get CAS back on track with regards to assessment, but we also now have a plan in place to do so. Along with the bullet points listed above, we will be working with all of our units to get their assessment plans updated and to get their assessment practices in line with our expectations. By making clear to all units that assessment is a priority in the college and across the university, and by providing them with the tools and resources to make their assessment efforts more practical, more efficient, and more effective, we are confident that next year’s CAS assessment report will show significant improvement.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Alex Enyedi
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

Cc: Ed Martini