I. THE CONTEXT FOR ASSESSMENT

“A Program for Continuous Improvement” is not only the title of this manual, it is the guiding philosophy of assessment efforts at Monmouth College. The following pages contain an outline of the various activities that comprise our assessment program. Included in this manual are background materials on the college and the nature of assessment, statements of general policy and procedure for the conduct of assessment, and descriptions of assessment activities designed for specific college programs. The essential elements of the assessment program include five requirements established by the faculty: a focus on student learning outcomes, use of the Purposes of Monmouth College as the basis for assessment of general education, the annual collection of “endpoint” data for all academic majors and for general education, a five-year cycle of reviews for major college programs, and a program of student portfolios.

Beyond the five required elements established by the faculty, the policies and procedures described in this manual are flexible and open to revision on a continuing basis. This is a working document. It is similar to committee procedures in that it can be revised in consultation with those affected. In fact, as we learn more about how best to assess and improve student learning at Monmouth College, undoubtedly our assessment program will change and evolved. Thus, the manual is description of the current state of our efforts. It is not a prescriptive or limiting document.

The primary function of the manual is to provide a common reference point for assessment activities, a place where the many individuals engaged in assessment can find guidance. A second major function is the role this document will play in allowing all of the college constituencies to see the scope of learning goals and activities at the college. In that regard, we hope this manual will expand our common understanding of the kind of college Monmouth is and the kind of learning we seek to promote.
MONMOUTH COLLEGE IN CONTEXT

Traditionally Monmouth College has been a four-year liberal arts college that devotes all of its resources - human, financial and physical - to developing and maintaining a program of undergraduate education of the highest possible quality. The college has always chosen to remain small. Our current enrollment expectation is to be a college for approximately one thousand students. Founded as an academy in 1853 by the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and elevated to a college three years later, Monmouth brought opportunity for higher learning to the people of the frontier. From its earliest days, Monmouth’s faculty has maintained a commitment to the teaching of intellectual and spiritual values.

Monmouth has chosen to remain the liberal arts college it was founded to be, preferring not to expand into a graduate or research university. Monmouth’s purpose is not to pursue knowledge for its own sake, but to encourage students to examine values and find meaning by bringing together knowledge and belief in a coherent whole. Monmouth seeks to prepare its students for rich, fulfilling personal and professional lives and for responsible citizenship in the world.

Monmouth is a residential college. The personal lives of its students, the social life of the campus, and academic course work are all closely interwoven. In fact, the close relationship between the faculty and students has been a hallmark of the college. It is this element of college tradition that is most shared by alumni across the years. To this day, the most powerful force shaping the direction of the college remains our commitment to advancing student learning. Our assessment program represents a more formal way of pursuing a very traditional goal of the college. The close relationship that students have with one another and the daily conversations among students, faculty and staff play a key role in the students’ growth and development. Implicit in this feature of college character is an emphasis on individual abilities and needs. We are not so much concerned with where students begin, but with how far they can go, how much they can achieve. This too is reflected in the nature of assessment at Monmouth College.

Monmouth College is affiliated with the United Presbyterian Church (USA). It is a member of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest and is fully accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Faculty, students and staff are actively involved in a wide-range of professional associations and intercollegiate activities. These interactions with others in higher education allow the college to remain connected to the expectations and standards of the wider world around us while providing sources for innovation.
HISTORICAL CONTEXTS FOR ASSESSMENT

The current assessment program at Monmouth College is a more formal and structure version of what has been our practice throughout the college’s history. We have long recognized the importance of remaining closely aware of the progress our students make and the success our teaching efforts produce in advancing the goals of students and the greater community. The impetus for a more formal system of monitoring student learning comes from initiatives instituted during the past ten years by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, an accrediting association of which Monmouth has long been a member. By 1992 NCA member colleges had determined that an effective formal assessment program would become a requirement for accreditation by the association.¹ The assessment movement is clearly related to a growing expectation of accountability by the public, but, for NCA members, assessment initiatives rest on a sincere belief that increased attention to student learning will lead to better educational outcomes. While NCA mandates an assessment program and has developed criteria defining the general characteristics of an effective one,² member institutions, such as Monmouth, have wide latitude to design systems that most appropriately serve institutional needs.

Efforts to build a formal assessment program at Monmouth began in 1993 under the direction of the Vice President for Academic Affairs who outlined for program chairs the nature of the NCA assessment initiative. In response to the Vice President’s call for development of a Monmouth College assessment plan, academic departments, general education rubrics and other several programs began discussions involving three issues: a) redefining the program and its relation to the college mission, b) articulating the specific goals of the program, and c) considering possible means of assessing student learning within the program. These discussions continued over the next 12 months. However, in early 1994 efforts toward designing an assessment program slowed as the college community became engaged in a search for a new president.


Upon her arrival the college’s new president, Dr. Huseman, determined the college needed to conduct a broader review of mission and strategy than that imagined in the assessment planning. Under the leadership of President Huseman the college community began consideration of the larger elements of strategic planning. Over the next year and a half a number of actions directed toward institutional planning were initiated including: campus open forums on the eight questions, meetings by various college committees and agencies, the formation of several task forces, and an all-college retreat. One result of these activities was the development of a new mission statement for the college (see the following section). This statement was adopted by the faculty, administration and College Senate in the Fall of 1996. Based on the new mission statement, the committee tasked with directing our self-study for the NCA accreditation visit in 1998 derived a statement of purposes for the college. This statement, adopted by the faculty in the Spring of 1997, has become the basis for much of our current assessment program (see The Purposes of Monmouth College in a following section).

As discussions concerning college mission and strategy neared closure in the Fall of 1996, efforts to develop and implement a formal assessment program for Monmouth began again in earnest. An Assistant to the Dean for Assessment was appointed and under his direction a structure for assessment planning was created and departments completed plans for the assessment of student learning in major and several other programs. Faculty teaching in general education rubrics also worked to complete descriptions of the mission and goals of general education at Monmouth. (These documents are contained in Chapter III of this manual.) Discussion in a number of venues culminated in a Faculty retreat in early 1996 concerning general education and assessment in general. Growing out of this retreat came the current form of assessment for general education including the portfolio project and the transcript reflection study. In the Spring of 1997 the President’s Council and Faculty Senate approved the appointment of an Assessment Committee. This committee then took up the task of completing the details of the Assessment Program as described in this manual and coordinating its implementation in Spring 1997. Formal approval of the Assessment Program by faculty and administration occurred in the Fall of 1997.

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A PHILOSOPHY OF ASSESSMENT FOR MONMOUTH COLLEGE

The structure of the Assessment Program is defined by the five elements mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Underlying that structure are several principles that guide the process.

1. Our first principle is an emphasis on continuously improving student learning at the college. By this we intend that all assessment activities should lead to a better understanding of what students are learning during their time at Monmouth and how well that learning is enabling students to meet the goals we have established. Our attention is not so much on where students begin but on where they arrive as they come to the end of their time at Monmouth. Efforts that do not, directly or indirectly, lead to a better understanding of learning outcomes are not important parts of the assessment process. Further, we do not collect assessment data solely to document our achievements. Assessment activities are always directed toward finding and testing new strategies and methods for improved teaching and learning effectiveness.

2. Our second principle is that assessment is an extension of what has always been a feature of the Monmouth experience, close attention to our students and their needs. Assessment activities should not become burdensome additions to our workloads. Rather, in so far as possible, we seek simply to formalize and record the evaluative activities that are normal to our programs and use them more systematically to foster improvement and innovation. In all cases assessment must be an integral part of our teaching and managing responsibilities.

3. Our third principle is that the process of assessment is ongoing and incremental. Both for college-wide assessment and individual program assessment activities, our intent is to begin with methods that allow us to discover areas where improvement seems possible, then follow these general indications with more specific studies that can lead to improvement. Quite simply, we do not seek to study everything at once; such an attempt would quickly overtax our resources, time and energy. Yet through ongoing and incremental efforts, the total program of the college will see improvement.
4. Our fourth principle is that assessment is developmental and not judgmental. Assessment activities are not for the purpose of judging or rewarding individuals or programs. Assessment is not a process through which “outsiders” dictate substantive matters to those who work within a program. In this regard, the only unacceptable assessment program is one that fails to look seriously at student learning data or which cannot conceive of ways to improve outcomes. We believe that professionals within disciplines and programs are best qualified to make judgments about their own work. They have the greatest commitment to program effectiveness, the greatest understanding of the issues involved and, in the end, the only real capacity to carry out meaningful change.

5. Our last principle is that assessment activities must be useful — to those who conduct them, to programs, to the institution. We expect that for the purposes of curricular planning, resource allocation, and long-range planning, assessment data will be useful and will be used. Our program as described in this manual contains the vehicles by which program improvement through assessment will be documented. Equally important is the likelihood that, through feedback to students (and others), the assessment program itself will add to the quality of our educational experience.
THE ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE

The Assessment Committee is an all-college committee under the direction of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and chaired by the Assessment Coordinator. It is responsible for ensuring the continuation and usefulness of the college’s assessment program. The committee includes representatives from a variety of areas of the college concerned with learning outcomes. Currently members include the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Vice President for Student Life, the Assistant to the Dean for Assessment, the Registrar and two additional faculty members appointed by the Faculty Senate (such that all three academic divisions of the college, Sciences, Social Sciences, and Arts/Humanities are represented).

The functions of the committee include

A) coordinating assessment activities,
B) providing support and encouragement for the use of assessment techniques and for implementation of changes made as a result of assessment,
C) initiating activities to enhance learning effectiveness,
D) facilitating the use of assessment results in college planning, budgeting and curriculum development,
E) writing summary reports on assessment at the college based on the activities of departments and individuals,
F) determining priorities for future assessment activity,
G) commissioning “occasional reports” and other special studies as deemed appropriate,
H) Reviewing each year the assessment program and recommending changes as needed

While the committee does conduct the “cycle of program reviews” it does not engage in judging courses, individuals or programs.
MISSION STATEMENT FOR MONMOUTH COLLEGE

As an undergraduate liberal arts college we recognize the close relationship of faculty and students to be fundamental to our learning environment. As a community of learners we strive to create and sustain an environment that is value-centered, intellectually challenging, aesthetically inspiring, and culturally diverse; and we hold as central our commitment to liberal arts education and to one another. We integrate a four year program of general education with in-depth study in the major and a rich array of co-curricular activities in order to foster the discovery of connections among disciplines and of larger patterns of meaning. Through these experiences, we help our students explore multiple perspectives on the human condition and prepare themselves for rich personal and professional lives...for leadership, citizenship, and service in a global context.

Monmouth College was founded in 1853 by pioneering Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. As a campus community we honor that heritage and value religious diversity as we explore the spiritual dimension of human existence and the relationship between faith and knowledge. As both observers and participants we seek to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the creative tension that exists among the principles of democracy, pluralism, equality, and freedom in our own nation and beyond.
THE PURPOSES OF MONMOUTH COLLEGE

As an undergraduate liberal arts institution Monmouth College exists to:

1. Prepare students for rich personal and professional lives.

2. Prepare students for positions of leadership, service, and citizenship in a global context.

3. Promote awareness and exploration of the sometimes contradictory principles which exist in democracy, pluralism, equality, and freedom.

4. Create and maintain a learning environment which is value centered, intellectually challenging, aesthetically inspiring, and culturally diverse. This includes:
   
   (A) Providing students with a four year general education program, in-depth study in the major, and a rich array of co-curricular activities.
   
   (B) Fostering the discovery of connections among disciplines and of larger patterns of meaning.
   
   (C) Promoting an understanding of a value system that is shaped by individual and collective experiences.

5. Explore the spiritual dimension of human existence and the relationship between faith and knowledge.

6. Introduce students to multiple perspectives on the human condition and promote self-awareness of global perspectives both through the curriculum and through campus life.

7. Foster and promote intellectual inquiry and critical analysis through mentoring relationships characterized by individual attention.

8. Develop creativity and skills in written and oral communication and artistic expression.

9. Understand the methods of inquiry and expression in

   (A) the arts, (e.g. art, music, theatre, creative writing)
   (B) the humanities, (e.g. English, foreign languages, history, philosophy, religion, speech)
   (C) the sciences, (e.g. biology, chemistry, physics, environmental science) and
   (D) the social sciences. (e.g. psychology, sociology, government, PEC)