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ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

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Greg Summers  
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Re: Summary of My March 10-11, 2011 Visit to UWSP

Dear Associate Vice Chancellor Summers:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with faculty, staff, and administrators at UWSP to review your recent work focused on building the University's commitment to assess student learning. I would like to comment on your institution-wide efforts from two perspectives: (1) leadership's recognition of the need to anchor assessment in the teaching-learning process to identify patterns of strength and weakness in student work and (2) development of a university wide assessment plan that engages faculty and student affairs educators in meaningful General Education and Department-level assessment to answer questions about learning that matter.

*Leadership's Recognition of The Need to Anchor Assessment in The Teaching-Learning Process*

Far too often in my work across institutions, I see assessment of student learning as a mechanical process of gathering data solely to satisfy external demands of accreditors, a finding affirmed in NILOA's October, 2009 report on assessment practices across US higher education. Satisfying external demands does little to engage faculty and other educators. In an internally driven process, however, educators direct their intellectual curiosity towards identifying patterns of strength and weaknesses in student work within the context of the teaching-learning process. In this effort educators are examining the efficacy of their educational practices through the authentic work that students produce along the chronology of their studies in both the curriculum and co-curriculum. Time for analysis and interpretation of results is identified as well as time for collaborative

discussion about ways in which patterns of weakness in student work can be improved through innovations or redesign of pedagogy, instruction, and the curricula and co-curriculum. At UWSP there is clearly a shared commitment to assessment as a meaningful inquiry process that belongs to faculty and other educators—a view stated by Provost Nook, integrated into the language of the Assessment Sub-Committee's documents, demonstrated in the work of Student Affairs, and woven into the workshops the Sub-Committee has been offering to assure that all faculty and staff have a shared understanding of this institutional commitment. Thus, sustainability of this commitment is built on intellectual curiosity about students' learning, not solely on responding to external mandates.

*Development of a University-wide Assessment Plan That Engages Faculty and Other Educators in Meaningful Assessment to Answer Questions That Matter*

Under the tireless leadership of Associate Vice Chancellor Summers and the commitment of faculty members serving on the Assessment Sub-Committee and The General Education Policy Review Committee, the University now has a robust plan that encompasses both the assessment of its newly designed General Education program as well as all of its academic programs. Specifically, the General Education Policy Review Committee's "Structural Components & Measurable Learning Outcomes," dated February 23, 2010 describes the mission of the new GE Program and identifies the learning outcomes that graduates must demonstrate. Discussion at our Assessment Sub-Committee meetings focused on the importance of launching an assessment cycle focused on one GE outcome beginning this Spring, 2011 so that the institution learns how to gather, interpret and use GE assessment results. An added benefit of assessing critical thinking now would be that results could be used to compare student achievement under the existing curriculum with student achievement under the new GE curriculum.

A new "Chapter 7," to be included in the *UWSP Handbook* describes the roles and responsibilities of the General Education Committee (GEC) as it oversees a 5-year cycle of assessing GE outcomes that robustly encompasses foundation-level courses, investigation-level courses, integration-level courses, and cultural and environmental awareness-level courses that align with the recommendations of AAC&U's LEAP outcomes and position students to produce work that aligns with Lumina's proposed Degree Profile.

This new "Chapter 7" identifies the cycles of inquiry that will be followed to assess students' GE outcomes (2012-2018). Beginning with students' first year seminar, assessment will be grounded in a problem-based framework designed to seek answers to open-ended questions about the kinds of difficulties students encounter as they learn. A new approach to assessment, as opposed to gathering evidence and attempting to make meaning of it, this orientation: (1) aims to identify and address patterns of weakness in student work that manifest themselves as early as students' first year seminar and (2) aims to track students' abilities to address or correct these weaknesses over time, such as long

held misconceptions or inabilities to transfer or apply learning in one course to a subsequent one.

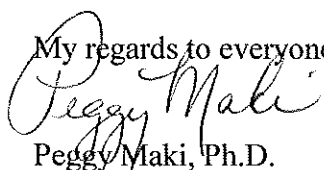
Further, the University has established a "Reporting Cycle for Assessment and Department Review, 2011-2021." Reports from all departments will be peer reviewed. Periodic workshops for representatives across the institution have been offered to assist all departments launch their initial assessment cycles. These workshops have deepened and broadened faculty and staff understanding of effective principles of assessment and have developed a shared understanding of and expectations for engagement in this process of intellectual inquiry.

### *Summary Remarks*

I am confident that UWSP will become an exemplar of problem-based assessment designed to raise and answer questions about the kinds of challenges and obstacles students face as they learn and the ways in which they misunderstand, misinterpret, or hold onto incorrect assumptions that inhibit their learning. I believe that unless institutions take this approach to assessment, they will not be able to make substantive innovations in educational practices to improve student learning. If colleges and universities rely merely on assessment results without ever posing questions about why students misunderstand or about how pedagogies or instructional strategies inhibit them from developing enduring learning, then assessment will remain a marginalized reporting out process and never substantially position institutions to rethink or improve their educational practices.

I need to add to this report that I was deeply impressed by faculty and other educators' commitment to assessment across the institution as evidenced by my meeting with numerous groups over my two days' visit and as evidenced by the high attendance at all of the assessment workshops I offered. During these workshops participants were building their plans, based on having articulated and mapped learning outcomes from the institution's previously offered series of workshops. In high attendance at the Friday workshop were not only faculty, but also representatives from across Student Affairs who have demonstrated a strong commitment to assessment in previous years. With this kind of commitment from both academic affairs and student affairs, I look forward to hearing about how assessment results from those two sectors lead to a robust interpretation of students' achievement of GE outcomes and conversations and decisions about ways to improve or enhance students' achievement of those outcomes.

My regards to everyone,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peggy Maki". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Peggy Maki, Ph.D.