January 14, 2008

Dr. Mary Breslin  
Associate Director  
The Higher Learning Commission  
North Central Association  
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400  
Chicago, IL 60602-2504

Dear Dr. Breslin:

I am writing to provide you with information concerning recent revisions of the plans for assessing the Liberal Arts Essentials (LAE) curriculum at Muskingum College. Because earlier versions of our assessment of the LAE were reported to the Higher Learning Commission, I thought it appropriate that the more recent information concerning these assessment plans also should be communicated. We believe that the revisions described in this letter will resolve certain ambiguities and weaknesses of the original assessment plan and thereby provide insights that will help us to change or adjust the LAE curriculum as appropriate.

Background Information  
From the time of the initial submission of assessment plans for our Liberal Arts Essentials curriculum to the Higher Learning Commission some four years ago, Muskingum College has had three Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs. Dr. George Sims first forwarded the assessment framework (e.g. the four major educational goals of LAE) in his final year as Chief Academic Officer of the College. Dr. Julianne Maher then became Interim Vice President for the 2005-06 academic. She was charged with the task of defining and implementing a strategy for determining how well the LAE curriculum was meeting its four educational goals. The strategy selected by Dr. Maher, a reasonable one given the time constraints under which she operated in her interim position, grafted assessment of the LAE onto the assessment of students’ academic achievement level in their senior capstone courses. Although this hybrid assessment strategy was able to provide a baseline of performance data quickly, it spawned doubts about the relation of the data to the LAE experience of students. In my own first year as Chief Academic Officer of the College (2006-07), I observed our Assessment Committee struggle with these doubts and search, ultimately without success, for ways to dispel them. Little progress was achieved during that year as the Committee tried to identify the threads of capstone data that led directly to the LAE curriculum.

Addressing Methodological Issues  
In academic year 2007-08, the Assessment Committee, now chaired by a faculty member who had previously identified ambiguities and flaws in the assessment strategy used for the LAE, tackled two issues that were making a significant number of our faculty
skeptical of the assessment process and less than enthusiastic in implementing LAE assessment in senior capstone courses. These issues included:

- The difficulty of determining the extent to which student competencies demonstrated in the senior capstone assessment can be attributed to the influence of our Liberal Arts Essentials curriculum
- The prospect of adding assessment of the four LAE goals to the already weighty task of assessing student achievement in senior seminars. Assessment of all four goals in each senior seminar was impractical and, if the goals were assessed individually year by year, it would require four years to complete the cycle of LAE assessment. The length of this assessment cycle would significantly delay compilation of a complete picture of the LAE’s effectiveness and quality.

Steps toward Revision
In response to these unsettling issues, the Assessment Committee began a careful review of LAE assessment process during the 2007 fall semester. The review led to three significant conclusions:

- Assessment should take place as close as possible to students’ experience with the LAE courses
- LAE courses should be aligned with LAE goals and reflect that alignment in course materials
- There should be a mechanism in place to report assessment results to the campus community and to stimulate reflection on the effectiveness with which LAE courses are meeting LAE goals

Accordingly, the Committee developed the following process for revising assessment of the LAE curriculum:

1. Every department with a presence in the LAE will identify one or more goals each of their LAE courses meet
2. The Assessment Committee will provide workshops for faculty to assist them in creating plans to assess specific LAE courses
3. Departments will submit assessment plans to the Assessment Committee for review
4. After the assessment plans are reviewed and approved or revised, a preset number of course sections will be selected to be assessed each year
5. The Assessment Committee will report results of assessment to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the faculty

This process was presented at a regular faculty meeting on November 20, 2007. Although no vote was taken, the plan met with general support because it came to grips with the very issues that had been troubling faculty. The Assessment Committee then issued a call to departments to forward to the Committee statements regarding alignment of its LAE courses with LAE goals. These statements were received prior to the holiday recess in
December, 2007. Implementation of the remaining components of the plan will begin during the 2008 Spring Semester and continue through the 2008-09 academic year.

Three other aspects of the new assessment process are worthy of note. First, the new process will continue to use the same four LAE goals that were approved by the faculty in 2005. This will provide a conceptual continuity between the earlier assessment plan and the revised plan. Second, the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Assessment Committee have created a Blackboard “course” on which assessment results (for both LAE and major programs) will be posted as they become available as well as notices from the Assessment Committee. There will also be a Blackboard discussion board where faculty may comment on results and make suggestions for improving or refining the LAE and/or major program curricula. Third, the Assessment Committee currently plans to complete a full cycle of assessment encompassing the four LAE goals within two academic years.

The model adopted in this revised plan is embedded assessment. Faculty will report on the quality of actual work produced by students in their classes. Samples of work chosen for assessment may be regular graded assignments or assignments specially designed for purposes of assessment but also part of the course syllabus. In either case, the samples must be directly related to LAE goals and are not to be used to evaluate class instructors.

Summary
This letter has provided an overview of revisions in the process of assessing the Liberal Arts Essentials curriculum at Muskingum College. It is our view that the revised process will provide a more coherent and less ambiguous profile of the extent to which the LAE curriculum is meeting its stated goals. It also will require that each academic department and its faculty to give serious consideration to the design and purpose of its LAE courses.

Should you have questions about any aspect of this revised assessment plan or desire additional details about the plan, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Paul Reichardt
Vice President for Academic Affairs
preichar@muskingum.edu