

## HLC Self Study Update

### Steering and Criterion Committees Host Guest Speaker

The Ferris HLC Steering Committee, at the suggestion of Senate Vice President and Professor Mike Berghoef, hosted a social work colleague of Mike's and Wendy Samuels (among others) from Grand Valley State University. Dr. Julie Guevara, in the Office of the Provost and the Assessment and Accreditation Officer, who retains her title as Professor of Social Work, served as the Chair of the self-study process at Grand Valley. Their decennial visit resulted in a very positive report for the University. Julie was invited to share her perspectives with the Ferris team. To learn more about their self-study process and their report, you can visit their page as a link from the Ferris HLC Self-Study Page: <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/administration/academicaffairs/HLC/examples.htm>

Julie offered many valuable insights as she described that she "had quite a lot of fun doing this." She observed that there was "tremendous buy-in from the Grand Valley community, from the administrators, the Board of Trustees, faculty, and students." Although she had been at Grand Valley for 15 years before undertaking this project, and feeling that she knew the institution "pretty well," she noted that "what I learned was incredible." She predicted that our group would "learn about Ferris State University in a very different way."

The learning stems, she reports, from having to look at the university "from a lot of different perspectives." . . . "appreciation for the University just grows." She and her team "saw it as something that was not intimidating but could be very useful." She reports that they did "use (the process) to study – to look at the policies, procedures, and structures at GVSU. "We are as a result making some significant changes at our institution with everyone understanding where those changes are coming from."

### Support from Upper Administrators

Speaking of her role, she was initially invited to take on responsibility for assessment and accreditation, that included this self-study. Her former experience with social work accreditation was helpful in this new role. Her position now also includes planning. Referring to her provost's support, she says she was told that "You oversee it but you will have all the support you will need so you can get this job done. She was true to her word. That's very important." "From the president's office and the provost's office – in the broader community – these individuals were talking about the importance of the self-study. They invited me to come to the Board of Trustees meetings. . . went to every college meeting – they made sure I was on the agenda; what the self-study was about and what our end goal was. Support was critical, I believe, to the success of our project."

## Board of Trustees' Members Play Key Role

"Having the Board of Trustees also involved in this process not just at the end but from the beginning" (was also important). "We had two members of the Board of Trustees on our subcommittees. People say that is a little dangerous. In the end, it was extremely helpful, because they sold the self-study to the other board members and the site visit team really recognized that the board had been involved in the entire process. (They) could explain strategic planning processes; the process of the self-study; and could explain other parts of the University. It also gave us the opportunity to understand the Board of Trustees role a little better.

Grand Valley's self-study started in 2006, culminating in a visit October 13-15, 2008. One of Grand Valley's first tasks was to put up a website. On this site was a link so that anyone could send in any comments or questions, and they could send them to her. She responded to every comment and every question. "People felt they had a voice and they could critique the work."

## Faculty Input is Critical

In addition to the support from the president, provost, and board of trustees, it was important to "make sure that faculty, in particular, have an avenue to voice their concerns and provide input." She advised: "Make sure that this process is very transparent. Any decisions that were made were explained. Drafts were available to the entire university community if they had a log-in. They could provide comments. . . Transparency was critical."

Near the beginning of the process, their HLC staff liaison was invited to come onto campus. Julie was regularly on the agenda of the Deans' Council to explain where they were in the process.

## Why is Accreditation Important?

Throughout the process they attempted to explain the importance of accreditation. Some units are more familiar with its importance than other units. What does accreditation mean if you don't have it? What are the options? How does that affect me as a faculty person or me as a student? Explain what that is. Use as much levity as possible. This can be very dry stuff. "The more you can make it light and use humor throughout. . . that worked well for us."

## Keep on Communicating

They were "always inviting people to our website." All steering committee members added the website and the dates of the visit to the bottom of their signature lines. "Some were just clicking because they got an e-mail with a weblink." Another strategy was to "attend a number of student senate meetings at the beginning of semesters." They had a student member on their steering committee.

On their public computers, they had the mission statement running across the computers. The "IT people just did it." As Julie was rereading the report of the site visit, she noted that they had "commented on how many people really knew their mission statement." She thinks the computer screensavers were a major factor in this. They also produced mouse pads with the University's mission. . . thin ones.

## Valuing Committees' Writing

They let people know that what they were writing would be used, even if only to inform other parts. Let them know so they were “not thinking they were writing for nothing. People put a lot of energy into this. When they (turn) something into something. . . that’s their blood/sweat/tears – they want you to appreciate the work even if you don’t use the words. I know people understood; we would edit; and in the end, it was my responsibility to decide what went in and what did not. In the end, it must read as one voice. It needs to read smoothly.” Her job as a HLC reviewer was to make sure that they wrote to the core components. “That was our outline. . . Examples were the examples they used. . . their evidence followed those examples. We learned that people verified what we wrote.

## Provide Forums

“People’s discussions were not vastly different than what people wrote and were saying.” (We held) “several forums to invite their comments.” (There was) “Inclusion from the very beginning.” Her goal as Self-Study coordinator was that “everyone in the Grand Valley community was involved. If one person did not know, it was because they chose not to know.”

Individuals were invited to the Open forums held at different days/times: two in Grand Rapids; two in Allendale; one each in Traverse City and Holland. They announced that they were “going to be available to talk about the process and the draft; (told them they would be) Soliciting your input.” They told people that although they were spending some money on this, “In the end when we are reaccredited, we continue to have students coming here. We have a direction for ourselves. I am not here to convince you about this process. Not saying what you have to do. You will have the opportunity to talk with them when they come. I wasn’t about convincing people – just about giving them an opportunity. We had some pretty productive sessions.”

Some would say, why did you not include this? In some cases, we said, “yeah, why don’t we?” Maybe what you are doing is actually better. We did not want a creaming effect. There are some great things going on and then some things that are just going on every day. We decided we would “put some of our great and some of our moderate examples in there.” It is important to know what shouldn’t be in there as well as there; thus, the president and provost were always involved in this process.

## Ongoing University Agenda

“Some things we were doing along the way. . . we were really ramping up assessment. Self-study helped us do that a little more.” Some asked, “Why are we doing now? One reason was North Central (HLC). The other was a new president and a new provost who was reorganizing the university.” Since the 98-99 self-study, the report had been buried in administration’s office. She and the Provost had a conversation about whether they should put that report up on the website. “In the end, if we are committed to transparency, that’s what we are going to do. “When making changes to graduate programs – reorganizing of that – they looked to the report for some of the suggestions. . . everyone could look at the report. Prior to January 2006, this report had not been available to anyone outside our administration. Just the idea to make documents available to faculty was new. “If you don’t know it exists, you don’t know.” Those were some of the things they dealt with and they decided to expand transparency.

## The Website and Transparency

Julie developed text for the website, but marketing developed the site. “They did it quickly because of the project. They knew the stakes involved with this. Committee members’ names and e-mail addresses were there; required to have the HLC website’s information there. Their frequently asked questions were also included. After the report was submitted to the HLC, all three volumes appeared on website. Every steering committee had hard copy plus disk; every dean got disk, every committee member had one. (They) also sent disks to site visitors.” About 150 faculty requested the disks – of 700 – in addition to distributing them to the individuals on the committees.

## Embedded Change Request

It is not uncommon to embed a change request within a comprehensive visit. GVSU embedded their request for a doctorate in nursing.

## Revising ‘til the End

A Ferris Committee member asked, “Up to what point did you let fresh information filter in or try to react.” She responded that this “is the beauty of a fall visit. . . don’t need to include the final fall’s input.” They sent materials to visit team on August 1. The final draft went to the University community at mid March, and stakeholders had until early April to get comments back. Julie was the only one taking comments at that stage; they would always come back to the self-study coordinator. The full document “went to marketing folks on June 1.” Then Marketing spent the month of June doing the editing. Do we want a comma here; font size; color coding on edges; the University community stopped having input into the document in mid-April. As of June 15, cannot change another word.

Julie would look at the new data as it became available to see whether it would change the meaning. In one instance, substantive changes were required in the general education sections, because “some fresh graphs that changed some dramatically” were produced. We considered, “what was more important – have the graph of marketing; or have the site visiting team see it as it really is.” “If the team had talked with the general education committee, they would have told them something very different than was in our document.” That would have been significant.

## Resource Room

“That was a huge project, putting together the resource room. Did not think too much about it until the document was out the door.” “One of our librarians was assigned to help put the resource room together.” Julie reported that they had all the resources available electronically, but they also had hard copies. Overall, HLC is moving more toward electronic resources. Julie had the resources cataloged so the site visitors could look at it in three different ways. They also had limited resources at their Grand Rapids location that related more to the professional and graduate programs offered there. They provided the self study and resources on a thumb drive that they provided to the team ahead of the visit. The thumb drive was sent by the first of September for an October 13 visit. Having the resources in their hands ahead enables them to spend the campus time talking to people.

## Importance of HLC Annual Meeting

Their steering committee members went the first year – half of the group. “I did not realize how important that was. Those folks just bought right into it. Part was addressing anxiety . . . they would say we need to do this and that. Excited and intimidated. Jumped into the job. The next year, the other half went to the meeting. It was helpful.”

## Campus Signage

With several new buildings on campus, and an engaged VP for Facilities and Planning, they utilized some signs that existed with the Mission statement, and added peel-off labels with the date of the HLC visit. They also put up signs about the visit in different languages--in the ones they had majors in – French, German, Russian, Classical Latin, Spanish. This step helped to promote a lot of things about your University.

## Communicating Everywhere by Key Leaders

“At every convocation speech, the president talked about the self-study. When the president and provost are out there in the broader community – economic club, orientation with parents and students - they talk about this. The student newspaper was quite involved. “(encouraged) the student newspaper to write articles about it.

## Satellite Locations and Transporting/Escorting Team Members

There were 13 members on the GVSU site visit team. Team members, in pairs, visited Muskegon, Holland, downtown Grand Rapids, and Allendale. They “visited” Traverse City via ITV. They set up a faculty forum and a student forum at each site; the IT department made sure the equipment worked, etc. Julie noted that they “had people going in a lot of different directions. . . We thought we would be challenged, and we were – but it’s do-able.” Steering committee members drove team members to the other sites, and they also escorted people from one place to another. Some wanted this escorting; some did not. They also had students taking people here and there.

## Computer Set Up and Resource/Team Room

GVSU set up an area with 13 computers, but they could have stopped at 4-5, since several brought their own computers. It is important to have a place where the team can “kick back,” where there is a phone, hassock, etc. They did not need as much resource room downtown as they did in Allendale. In the future, Julie shared that she would not make as many copies. (Note: Ferris is hoping to get by with doing very few hard copies.) Another piece the team appreciated was the list of acronyms. Institutional marketing had suggested including a list of figures and tables, which was also well received, along with the color-coded chapters.

## The Report

Their chapter 2 overviewed changes in the institution since the prior visit. In that chapter, they also addressed challenges from the prior visit and how those were addressed. Their document was sent during the summer, for a fall visit. During the Fall the Provost or president sent notices to institutional stakeholders encouraging that the self-study be part of the fall start-up meetings. The self-study coordinator was given 15 minutes on everyone's agenda where she explained the process. Steering committee members also participated in these meetings. She also developed talking points for steering committee members. In the end, these talking points were thought to be valuable. "Every time I talked to faculty and students (I shared). . . we are not here to tell you what to say. . . this is your opportunity. It is completely up to you." She was reluctant to send out the talking points, for fear that people would think they were being told what to say. One college did use them. The President and provost also participated in the start-up meetings. They participated in about 15 academic and 5 non-academic units' meetings, and the entire schedule was posted on the web.

## What the Team Reviewed

When you look at the self-study guide, they mention having some documents on site – like College minutes from curriculum committee, personnel, etc. "They did not ask to review those. That was difficult" (because they had them all there.) "One piece they spent a lot of time on was faculty scholarship and service. "One thing you have to demonstrate is scholarship and service. . . had just finished workload planning." To gather faculty information, they put out a call to the deans; "you have the vitae; send them to us so we can review them. One of the librarians took the vitae. Let's do a sampling. . . put together two nice documents." The Provost wrote an introduction to each one. This is a sample of the scholarship – from books, to articles, to creative expression, etc. Another volume was on service. Sections were broken out into international, regional, state, and local – with samples from 2000 on. "Glad we did that because people asked for it. They wanted to know about faculty scholarship. Where do you keep it? It is kept in the dean's office." They also asked for a workload plan from a specific unit. They asked a lot of questions about strategic planning. She had been involved in putting together a strategic plan.

## Exit Meeting

At the final meeting, they were told "these are all the things you are doing right. Great visit – well accommodated; documents thorough; documents reflected evidence; reflected assessment; have met all the criteria. No question about the criteria. We have some comments for the advancement section." Prior to the visit, they will ask what areas you would like them to talk about – areas you would like to improve on. Theirs included assessment; planning; and lack of state resources, and they did that. In rewriting the plan they were able to use what they said and incorporate the ideas into their new plan.

## Feeling of Success

"Successful, when it was over, people felt it had been a good process for them; felt that we really did study the institution; able to make changes based on the study and the self-study report. Bigger success was the inclusion of the community and their owning the process and the study. That to me was very successful."

## Assessment and Graduate Infrastructure

Assessment committee became an assessment governance committee – faculty is requiring this. They are working with a new university governance committee and they bought a new system called WeaveOnline (a product comparable to our TracDat – and one of the products Ferris evaluated). Regarding assessment reports: “We are done with paper copies.” Julie notes that they were ramping up assessment at the same time as they started the Self-Study. They are “trying to move assessment forward a little faster. Helping them write assessment plans. As we are doing this, see that we have not met the standard. There has been a “re-education of assessment and a re-education of what you do with results.” Had 2/3 of academic and non-academic in system and had used some of the data to make some of their changes. Same thing was true with general education.”

“How did campus tolerate assessment? With some push-back. We were introducing a system to keep track of systems, so it became more standardized. Some were very resistant. Some feel as if they are rather unique so assessment does not really apply to them.” She took the approach that they need to “understand assessment - period – it was not about convincing them that it’s the greatest thing – but it is a requirement. Given that it is, what do we do? You can go all out and do very little. In the end, your peers are evaluating this – not me. This is an era of accountability. Unless we dictate how we are going to be accountable, others will do that for us. We ought to take hold of that discussion and we ought to lead that. Have them frame it in a way that it is not something that you are not doing but to articulate it a little differently. It’s a choice. You can either do this or do this. You decide what to do. Having ear of the deans’ council (was important.) How does it benefit us? It takes my time – yup – that is true. When we got the word that it was 10 years – with no follow-up – they were just happy. This becomes part of our environment; this is what we do.”

They also created an infrastructure for graduate studies. They also looked at some of the significant changes that did not occur.

## Acknowledgment

The “Biggest – acknowledge people’s work. It is interesting.” The experience gave her much more appreciation for the people who work at the institution. The process was “like finishing a puzzle.” For two years she went from office to office and meeting to meeting, and one remarked: “the university owes you a new pair of shoes.” “For me, everything is about relationships. If you can develop it and then deliver, you are good to go. We had a great steering committee--people who were willing to go all out because they were extremely invested in the university. (Their attitude was, ‘Come on, let’s go talk with or let’s go do. That’s how we got so much buy-in.” Julie was on faculty for 15 years before she took the associate provost position, thus she was not new in the institution. “People had some respect for that and those folks who were on the steering committee. Letter to steering committee members came from the provost. Julie wrote to subcommittee – had 5-8 for each. Everybody said yes. This is an institution-wide project.”

## Organizing and Continuation –

The provost and the IT dean continue to support it. We have locked into that system (WeaveOnline) for the next few years. “What did go away was my grad assistant. There is a higher level of information at the college level. (Think about. . .) If we have visitors coming in, what are some of those things they will want to know? How can we organize that for them? How much data? Resumes? Service? Demographics of students?”

Develop a list of things to have available. It made sense because colleges are spread out – minutes of standing committees, personnel stuff, curriculum, if dean has advisory board, advisory committee, faculty vitae – HR office needs to be included a lot. “This is high stakes. You know what, this has to be done. . . how can we help you to do it. We received everything we asked for. Some of that comes from the president, provost, and Faculty Senate. Faculty Senate was very key in this too. We talked to them all the time.”

We did a study session with the Board of Trustees and every committee of the faculty and student senates. Theirs was “what kinds of questions do you think they are going to ask me?” (There will be ) “different questions for different groups.” She knew from their peer reviewers on campus as well as her own accreditation experience what to expect; she read all the external accreditation visits; knew what those folks were attending to. (It was) “Not too difficult to figure out who was going to be asking what kinds of questions. These are our peers. They are here to find out about us; it’s ours to talk about. She presented last April at the annual meeting and was sitting there and people were coming up to talk to somebody else who was describing how awful it was – how they grill you . . . It’s tough. It’s rigorous. Can you improve? Who can’t? It’s not life and death. We all probably do a pretty good job at our places. . . if we don’t, maybe we are in trouble.”

A benefit from their self-study was that they have a different workload policy and procedures that was beneficial to the faculty. It is a “whole lot better than it was a year ago.

*This issue of the HLC News is focused on the many excellent pieces of advice we acquired from the visit of Grand Valley State University’s self-study coordinator. The next issue (September 2009) will update you on Ferris’ progress on the self-study.*