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Report of the Chair

Mike Veall
McMaster University. Department of Economics

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Report of the Chair of the
Task Force on Evaluation, Accountability and Measurement

Mike Veall

August 5, 2008

The Provost's Task Force on Evaluation, Accountability and Measurement was charged in part with developing "a process to assess departments and units…" Its first listed activity was "consulting with members of the McMaster community as to what to measure and how to evaluate departments and units…" The consultation efforts are further described in the Appendix but included a survey of departments, a summary of which is attached to this report.

The Task Force's goal was to report by the end of June. At the first of two meetings in June, after an active discussion the Chair was asked to draft a report that would articulate a number of principles. However, the second of the two meetings in June (and the final one scheduled for the academic year) was not well attended. This is therefore the draft report that the Chair brought to that meeting, believing it reflected the consensus from the earlier meeting. He then revised it slightly in response to the comments of those in attendance (all of whom were in favour of it) and two email comments.

The Task Force remains open to consultation. Any responses to this report can be sent to tfeam@mcmaster.ca or by mail to its chair, Mike Veall, Chair, Department of Economics. It is recognized this report does not cover the issue of assessing the "university as a whole", which is also part of our terms of reference.

The Principles:

1. *All units of the university should be reviewed regularly.*
2. *Different units of the university should be reviewed differently.*
3. *Units should have significant input into the criteria by which they are reviewed.*
4. *Reviews should be as transparent as possible at all stages and should afford the opportunity for input to all relevant members of the community.*
5. *At least some of the review team should be external to the unit.*
6. *Reviews should include comparisons.*
7. *Reviews should focus on the "output" of the unit in question in relation to its resource use.*
8. *Reviews should not be unduly onerous.*
9. *Reviews must be followed-up.*

1. *All units of the university should be reviewed regularly.*

This principle is espoused by Robert C. Dickeson in his book *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance*. This principle promotes efficiency, as there is an opportunity to evaluate all activities. But it also promotes the perception of fairness, as all units participate. To be clear, this principle

would cover administrative units at all levels, academic service units, research institutes and academic departments.

"Regularly" however may mean different frequencies for different units. A benchmark for full-scale review might be the every-seven-year frequency of review of academic graduate programs. In some cases, more frequent, less-detailed reviews will be appropriate, probably directed to specific targets.

Our terms of reference indicate that the context of evaluation should be the goals expressed in *Refining Directions*. We take these to be a learning environment goal, a research goal and an inclusiveness goal. Even though some of our input from the community criticized *Refining Directions,* our view is that it is more important to try to move towards implementation of methods that may achieve these broad goals, which we believe are widely acceptable at least in this general form, than it is to try to modify the goals themselves. We hold this view even though the shared common understanding of the third goal is incomplete.

2. *Different units of the university should be reviewed differently.*

Review methods need to be tailored to unit function. It will be useful if the review *structure* is similar across broadly similar types of units, because that will help educate the community about reviews and also promote the perception of fairness. But review *criteria* will differ substantially. To take an example cited frequently in our survey of academic units, it should not be expected that members of a Department in the Faculty of Humanities should receive research grants comparable to those in a Department in the Faculty of Engineering.

Special mention should be made of research institutes at McMaster that do not seem to be required to be subject to any sort of University review. From the perspective of University resources, perhaps four types of such units can be identified: (a) entirely self-sustaining units (include covering the costs of their own space (b) units that are essentially self-sustaining except for space (c) units that are partially self-sustaining and (d) units that are essentially reliant upon the University. It can be argued that at least (a), (b) and (c) units are subject to external review every time they raise funds but it seems natural that the University should also have some sort of review mechanism and that it be more extensive the more University resources are being used. In some cases, these units do have strong review mechanisms and all that may be required is to ensure those reviews are reported in some fashion to the University.

3. *Units should have significant input into the criteria by which they are reviewed.*

Jon Wergin in his book *Departments that Work* emphasizes that successful review cannot be purely top-down but requires participation of the unit itself in setting the criteria by which it should be judged. It may be that the within-unit process that sets the criteria and the development of some shared within-unit goals are valuable outcomes in themselves. Units' criteria will have to be reviewed externally. A unit that games the review process

by specifying easy targets risk portraying itself as complacent. More generally, the criteria need to reflect the unit's goals as closely as possible or there is a risk of perverse incentives.

Fundamentally, the criteria should embody a response to the questions, "How do you know if your unit is doing a good job? How would you demonstrate that to someone outside the unit?"

4. *Reviews should be transparent at all stages and should afford the opportunity for input to all relevant members of the community.*

There should be a list each year of those units that will be reviewed. Those who have a legitimate interest to do so ("users" may they be students, staff or faculty) should have the opportunity to provide comments to a review. An example is when there are interdependencies among units (e.g. one academic department has a program that requires courses from another academic department) so that each unit has an interest in the other's actions. A review may provide one means for those interests to be reconciled.

To the maximum extent possible, all reviews should be as public as possible. This means that the process should be completely transparent. It is recognized that sometimes having a final report completely public may make reviewers reluctant to make strong recommendations (and there must be respect for the privacy of individuals) but at the very least, it should only be in extraordinary circumstances that a review is not available to all members of the unit reviewed. A meaningful part of all reviews should normally be available to the McMaster community. Units must have the opportunity to respond, with responses available jointly with the original reviews.

5. *At least some of the review team should be external to the unit.*

This is again in the interests of transparency, but also efficiency as suggested improvements from someone external to the unit may be of particular value. In the case of reviews of academic departments, having reviewers from similar departments at other universities has been the standard, and our survey indicates that practice is widely accepted within McMaster academic departments. Such reviewers also represent the "user community" for research.

The Chair notes that there is some feeling within the Task Force that the review team should always be entirely external.

6. *Reviews should include comparisons.*

The best comparisons are often with similar units at other universities or for the same McMaster department over time. Unfortunately in each case there are serious data shortcomings that are also noted in the discussion of principle 8. We expect that many of these data shortcomings will be solved in the short to medium term.

7. *Reviews should focus on the "output" of the unit in question in relation to its resource use.*

When evaluating the "output" of units, it is clearly necessary to take the amount of inputs used into account. The more resources a unit uses, the higher should be expectations.

8. *Reviews should not be unduly onerous.*

In some cases, a review may be very simple, for example if a unit's resource use is so small as not to justify a more extensive review or if a unit's activities are sufficiently simple as to be evaluated easily.

If a unit is subject to multiple review processes, the processes should be combined if that reduces total effort. For example, reforms in the Ontario Council on Graduate Study assessment process may yield an opportunity to combine this process with Undergraduate Program review, and we feel this opportunity should be seized. If possible and time-saving, other reviews (e.g. accreditation reviews) should be conducted at the same time as well.

Any review requires certain standard numerical information. For example in the case of an academic department, these could be enrolment, research grants etc. There has been progress in making research grant information more accessible. Still the ultimate goal should be that as part of a review process, the unit begin with a template that is "pre-populated" with as much of the required numerical data as possible.

To accomplish this and in general to use data more effectively in university decisions, information systems need to be much stronger and more current. Information access problems make many tasks within the University much harder than they should be. As noted, there has been improvement. The Provost has indicated that remaining problems will not be fixed overnight, but will be fixed.

This emphasis on data should not overshadow the need for judgment and interpretation.

9. *Reviews must be followed-up.*

Reviews are not an end in themselves. They are only useful if they lead to actions that improve the university. In this context a couple of our members have argued that in some cases Faculty planning committees need to be streamlined with fewer members. While we have not studied this issue across the university, it clearly merits consideration within each Faculty.

A particular example of lack of follow-up was raised by input we were provided by a student who pointed out that while course evaluations at McMaster may ask whether a room is too hot or too cold, nothing ever seems to be done. Indeed it appears that such information does not regularly find its way to those in Physical Plant who could do something. While we leave issues regarding student evaluations of instruction to the Task

Force on Teaching and Learning, we believe that perhaps student input on room quality issues could be received earlier within each course and, if only the summative question responses are going to be used for instructor assessment, perhaps the evaluation questionnaire could be simplified.

Another issue concerning follow-up came from an academic department that felt that if a review found that more faculty resources were required, then more faculty resources should be supplied. We do not know when that particular department was last reviewed but the Provost told us that reviews that recommend more resources are very common and even if the case is persuasive, resources are often not available. While the issue of insufficient resources is pervasive, the point here is that post-review communication between departments and the administration is very important. In addition, perhaps reviewers need to be encouraged to include more suggestions that do not require significant resources for implementation.

Future Steps:

The Chair is in discussion with the committee members and the Task Force about subsequent steps.

Appendix:

We met eight times during the period February 11, 2008 to June 27, 2008. We issued an initial call for feedback that received 25 responses, 4 from students, 1 from staff and 20 from faculty. With the help of a focus group of department chairs, we designed a detailed survey that was sent to all academic departments (and the equivalent) by which we mean departments that have direct teaching and research functions. 23 responses were received (1 from an individual who was not a Chair). A list of 90 research institutes (and similar units) was identified and was sent a less structured survey. 5 responses were received. With respect to administrative service units, at one meeting, there was a presentation on the "Inspiring Change" initiative, a review process that is being developed on the administrative side using the balanced scorecard/strategy map approach. The particular example that was explored was the application to Grounds, Parking and Security. Our Chair met with leaders of some academic service units that are under the purview of the Provost: the Acting Registrar, the University Librarian and the Director of the McMaster Museum of Art. He also met with the Associate Vice President Research, Andy Hrymak, Chair of Chemical Engineering, Director of the McMaster Manufacturing Research Institute who formerly led the *Implementing Refining Directions* group and Anne McInnis of Planning and Analysis. We also met with the Provost.

Our terms of reference and initial membership, our initial request for input, a link to Refining Directions, brief summaries of our meetings and our survey of academic departments are available at its web site:

http://www.mcmaster.ca/vpacademic/currentpriorities/Eval_%20Acount_Meas.html

Membership in Task Force:

Chair, Mike Veall, Professor and Chair, Economics

Susan Birnie, Administrator, Education Services
David Capson, Professor and Acting Dean, School of Graduate Studies
Andrea Farquhar, Director, Public and Government Relations, University Advancement
Mita Giacomini, Associate Professor, Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics
Bradd Hart, Professor and Chair, Mathematics and Statistics
Milena Head, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, DeGroote School of Business
David Hitchock, Professor, Philosophy
Basel Jarrad, Undergraduate student and Chair of SRA, University Affairs
Aine Leadbetter, Graduate student
Jennifer McKinnell, Education Coordinator, Health Sciences Library
Bob McNutt, Chair, Alternative Budget Model Task Force
Jackie Osterman, Academic Advisor, Faculty of Humanities
Lilian Scime, Assistant Vice-President, Administration

(Note: Early in the process, Task Force member Linda Norek, Business Manager of the Faculty of Social Sciences, resigned as she needed to concentrate on her own duties.)