



National Center for Higher Education Management Systems  
P.O. Box 9752 • Boulder, Colorado 80301-9752 • (303) 497-0301  
Fax: (303) 497-0338 • Website: <http://www.nchems.org>

## MEMORANDUM

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**TO:** Patrice Moulton and Veronica Ramirez  
**FROM:** Karen Paulson  
**SUBJECT:** Summary of Unit Plans and Final Project Comments  
**DATE:** March 19, 2004

It has been a pleasure working with Northwestern State as it prepares its Quality Enhancement Plan for use in its SACS reaffirmation process. To do so, NCHEMS worked with NSULA administrators and faculty as they developed unit plans aligned with University-wide goals. Northwestern State defined several terms including unit, division, department, college, and budget unit and clarified how these various unit levels relate to one another. Some of these “units” represent an aggregation of similar units (for example, at the dean and vice-president level). There are a total of 57 units: 1 university, 5 divisions, 16 departments, 8 colleges, and 28 budget units. Unit plans are now available at the NSULA website built for accreditation purposes, <http://sacs.nsula.edu/display/universitydefault.aspx>. This site gives clear indication of where a particular unit falls within the structure of the University, what its parent unit is, and which units are subordinate to it.

All units at Northwestern State developed plans aligned to the four University goals. Each unit was asked to write two objectives for addressing how the unit helps the University achieve a particular goal. If it was difficult for a unit to determine two objectives for each goal, it was acceptable—with the Director of Institutional Planning and Assessment’s approval—to have only one objective. After first drafts of the “Initial Objectives” templates were completed, units elaborated their plans by completing the “Strategies” template. The final step of the planning cycle will be the completion this summer of the “Follow Up” template by units showing what progress they have made in achieving their objectives and showing use of data and information.

Previous work to develop unit plans in 2002 resulted in an array of 28 plans from across the University. These earlier efforts represented an honest attempt by those units to capture their goals, but because these plans were isolated from one another they did not create a comprehensive plan or picture for Northwestern State University. To align the units, the Director of University Planning and Assessment and the Coordinator of University Assessment with NCHEMS’ input developed standardized templates for units to use in preparing their “Initial Objectives,” “Strategies,” and “Follow Up” to indicate how each unit

would contribute to University goals. Most units drafted their “Initial Objectives” templates in early 2003, and NCHEMS then reviewed draft plans from 42 units. Of these, 8 (19%) were well done, 24 (57%) were good with only limited revision necessary, and 10 (24%) required considerable additional attention. Generally speaking, those units that had previously worked on plans in 2002 developed more thoughtful and practical unit plans. NCHEMS again examined unit plans in early 2004. NCHEMS specifically reviewed the 10 plans that required additional attention, and all are substantially improved. Thirteen more units had by then drafted plans and NCHEMS reviewed those in early 2004 as well. All these unit plans were solid with good foundation work accompanying them.

Preparing unit plans made most units reflect on their roles within the larger university and whether they perform their roles effectively. Because the institutional planning process is ongoing, units will likely be prepared to write even better objectives and measures for the next cycle. Therefore, a key activity now is the follow-through on this first cycle of the planning process that resulted in the current set of unit plans. Specific attention by Northwestern State’s administration referring to unit plans in the institutional planning process will demonstrate to units administrative commitment to the planning process. During the review of “Follow Up” templates with units, it will be especially important to stress the use of data and information for improvement in order to foster a “culture of evidence” on-campus.

Observations culled from the most recent examination of current unit plans and a reiteration of some general principles used when completing unit plans are provided below:

- Objectives are more long-term; strategies and activities represent a shorter-term vision of what the unit actually hopes to accomplish in the coming planning cycle.
- In order to signal ownership, units should state objectives, assessment, strategies, and activities in terms of the unit’s own behaviors, not in terms of what others would do. The section of “interdependencies” on the “Strategies” template allows for highlighting necessary relationships.
- Some units are still predicating their plans on additional resources. Units were to focus within their “scope of resources”—that is, based on current funding, what is practical for the unit to accomplish?
- The unit plan should not be a platform for lobbying for additional resources. Although a unit may use its unit plan to gather data that can then be used to support arguments for changing policies and/or procedures, or for garnering additional resources, the unit plan itself is not an appropriate vehicle to make appeals for more resources.

- Making unit plans public by posting them online will likely induce some units that have not taken this exercise as seriously as others to put more thought into their next versions.
- Existing data and information sources (such as existing university reports, course assignments, student learning outcome assessment, surveys, etc.) should constitute the first option for assessment measures to address the accomplishment of objectives. Targeted measures like identifying a specific assignment or survey question directly related to the objective have more utility than broad assertions such as “we are accredited.”
- Some determination needs to be made about how much progress is acceptable, and by when, in cases where the timeline identified is “ongoing.”

Northwestern State University in Louisiana has made substantial progress in the past 18 months toward creating a more systematic and systemic method of institutional planning and assessment with a particular focus on student learning. All units within the University have participated in the process, have developed an initial unit plan to be used in institutional planning and assessment, and are now aware of the four University goals.