

**ROBERT MORRIS UNIVERSITY**  
**Outcomes Assessment Plan**  
(Revision of the Plan dated 6/2/97)  
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**Committee on Outcomes Assessment**

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The use of outcomes assessment data is a vital means to gauging institutional effectiveness. Assessment data can help both internal and external stakeholders evaluate the University's success in its primary focus: its students' academic and personal achievement. The information provided by an effective outcomes assessment process provides an important link between overall institutional mission and goals and the efforts expended at the departmental, major and course levels. The ideal outcomes assessment program is characterized by Middle States as one that "need not be elaborate, but...should be *thorough, persistent, and self-sustaining* in order to support continuous improvement." Robert Morris University's overall assessment effort flows from the institution's Mission and Vision Statements as it focuses on the major functions of the University that are reflected in them.

Major improvements are needed in the existing outcomes assessment effort at the University. The existing plan, drafted in 1997, was largely an inventory of outcomes assessment measures. The plan did not set forth an overall structure for outcomes assessment at the University, did not assign responsibility for overseeing plan implementation, did not actively involve faculty in assessment planning and design, did not provide for information flow to and between decision makers, did not link course and program level assessment to overall institutional goals and did not establish timetables and means for implementation. This revision will attempt to address all of those deficiencies. To that end, the Committee recommends that the following measures be implemented at RMU:

- Each academic program/major, graduate as well as undergraduate, must have an assessment process based on program outcome goals which are related to the educational purposes of the University as outlined in its Mission Statement. In light of Middle States' recommendation that a new bureaucracy not be created to oversee outcomes assessment, the overall responsibility for developing the assessment program for academic programs should be jointly vested in each school's administration, curriculum and planning committees. The management responsibility for the assessment process in each school shall be vested in its Dean.
- Assessment plans must be developed for the general education component of the curriculum. The responsibility for developing and managing the assessment program for the general education program should be vested in RMU's Academic Deans Council in consultation with the University-wide Undergraduate Curriculum Committee.
- Student support and non-academic areas of the University must develop and implement outcomes assessment plans by organizational unit.
- The Robert Morris University Committee on Outcomes Assessment (COA) will oversee the assessment process. It will be charged with designing a standard template for preparing individual plans, gauging the effectiveness of the plan, ascertaining the degree to which it has been implemented, assessing the use of assessment data for improvement, and monitoring the assessment requirements of

regulatory bodies. There must be a formal reporting process between the school-level assessment efforts and the COA so that COA can track the overall progress of the plan as well as record the individual assessment measures used at the University.

- The COA will also review the University's overall assessment process to see whether it is providing information that facilitates improvements that are congruent with the University's Mission and Vision and the attainment of its 5 year plan.
- Outcomes assessment measures should be built into and utilized as part of the University's periodic academic program review.
- All new academic programs should address outcomes assessment as part of their approval process.
- The outcomes assessment plan should be fully implemented by the beginning of Fall 2002.
- Assessment planning and the conduct of assessment activities within each academic program is the ongoing responsibility of that program's faculty. Thus, the assessment program is based on those outcomes goals deemed important by the faculty and upon their judgment regarding which information on student learning would aid in program improvement.
- The responsibility for outcomes assessment in student support and nonacademic areas is vested in their administration and staff. Those who know our students and our programs best are in the best position to ascertain where improvements are necessary.
- All assessment efforts must incorporate appropriate human subjects protection.

This plan is not prescriptive regarding course-level assessments. The COA understands and accepts that these measures occur in the natural course of teaching and are governed by the syllabus for each course. However, the COA encourages the dissemination of success stories and innovative approaches to course-level assessment throughout the faculty for the benefit of both faculty and students.

The shared responsibility, coordination and information flow between COA and the organizational units involved in managing the assessment process is vital to the successful implementation of an effective outcomes assessment effort at RMU.

Robert Morris University's efforts at assessing its effectiveness across the major functions within its mission are part of a continuous process of reviewing performance and achievement of goals. Both the activities and the results of assessment in the area of student learning must be integrated with academic program review, annual reporting by units, and five-year plans of the schools. Such integration will increase the contribution of each process to the support and strengthening of programs and performance.

The emphasis in tying these activities together is in getting useful information on student achievement and other aspects of University performance into whatever decision arenas are appropriate for program and institutional improvement. RMU's internal process for

monitoring the assessment program focuses on the use of assessment results in program change and in the evaluation of the assessment process itself.

RMU's assessment program is structured as a participatory process, jointly designed by faculty and administration. Overall the Academic Deans Council and the COA provide leadership. The COA serves as the institution-level coordinating body for assessment. The Academic Deans Council will manage the implementation, administration and documentation of the assessment process. The Director of Institutional Research has responsibility for providing support for assessment activities at all levels of the University.

Ultimately, the faculty are responsible for assessment activities in their programs. An assessment program cannot be successful unless the faculty take ownership of the goals and measures, ask questions of concern to them, and find in the answers information of value for improving program effectiveness and student learning.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

According to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education's *Framework for Outcomes Assessment* (1996), the "fundamental purpose of assessment is to examine and enhance an institution's effectiveness, not only in terms of teaching and learning, which rest at the heart of the mission at colleges and universities, but also the effectiveness of the institution as a whole." This succinct summary of a complex undertaking is codified into Middle States' accreditation guidelines. Regulatory requirements aside, it makes eminently good sense for any institution to have a sincere desire to continuously improve the services that it provides to its stakeholders.

Robert Morris University must implement an outcomes assessment program that provides an ongoing review of its effectiveness. Any program for assessing institutional effectiveness has two components: (1) gathering and compiling information on the extent of RMU's accomplishments in achieving defined purposes; and (2) using such information for institutional planning and program improvement. According to Middle States, four objectives must be met in order to reach the overall goal of institutional effectiveness:

- the improvement of teaching and learning,;
- contribution to the personal development of students;
- institutional improvement; and
- accountability.

This plan will set forth a road map for achieving both these four objectives as well as the ultimate goal.

The outcomes assessment program at RMU flows directly from the institution's mission. The structure of the assessment program as well as the range of associated assessment activities must assess RMU's performance in carrying out its mission "...to offer high

quality undergraduate and graduate degree programs that integrate the liberal arts with professional programs in Business, Applied Sciences, Teacher Education and Communications." The University's Vision Statement further articulates a commitment to "...providing superior services to students and employers seeking graduates with professionally oriented degrees emphasizing applied knowledge." An effective outcomes assessment process would produce data and findings that gauge congruence with the present Mission and Vision as well as providing feedback that can be used for subsequent revisions to these statements.

While the discussion which follows addresses the structure, focus and progress of a redesigned comprehensive institutional assessment effort, it should be emphasized that a wide range of assessment activities has been conducted at RMU for the past decade. The assessment program outlined here will provide a better coordinated and more comprehensive gathering of evidence on outcomes in all components of the institution's mission and a systematic use of this evidence in improving institutional performance.

### **3. PREVIOUS OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PLANS AND MEASURES AT RMU**

The University has traditionally incorporated its outcomes assessment plans into Middle States Self-Study documents. The first of these, which appeared in the 1992 Self-Study, was simply an enumeration of the University's catalog of assessment measures. A more detailed description of the University's outcomes assessment measures and plans appeared in the 1997 Periodic Review Report to Middle States. Chapter 3 of this document (pages 57-90) contains the plan.

A comparison of this document against Middle States' requirements and other institutions' outcomes assessment plans reveals several notable deficiencies:

1. No one was given overall responsibility for coordinating and documenting the University's outcomes assessment effort;
2. There was no administrative mandate or support for outcomes assessment;
3. There was no timetable for implementing the outcomes assessment plan;
4. The plan did not prescribe sufficient breadth and depth of assessment either in individual programs or institution-wide;
5. There is little evidence of faculty involvement in designing the outcomes assessment process; and
6. No process was implemented to track the efficacy of the outcomes assessment measures or the improvements resulting from the data gathered.

Despite these failings it is heartening to note that the RMU community has embraced outcomes assessment in many areas of its operations. A recent audit conducted by the Committee on Outcomes Assessment in preparation for the 2002 Middle States Self-Study documented 62 unique outcomes assessment measures conducted at RMU, most of which were completed after 1997 and which encompass nearly every area of the University's operations. A significant percentage of these studies produced data that was actually used for the improvement of teaching and learning or of University services.

Outcomes assessment has demonstrably been used at the University to improve its effectiveness; the guidance of an effective outcomes assessment plan would provide a framework to boost the momentum of this effort.

#### **4. PHILOSOPHY OF THE REVISED OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PLAN**

The assessment program at RMU has two specific and complementary purposes:

1. To improve student learning and performance, and
2. To improve programs, program planning and program development.

These purposes are supported by an institutional commitment to conduct an outcomes assessment plan that has integrity. The University pledges that assessment will be conducted for improvement, not just to pay lip service to accreditation requirements or to ride along with current educational trends. Outcomes assessment is meaningful only if the information gained is used for program improvement. RMU's assessment program is intended to be an integral component of a long-term institutional process of planning and review, using the feedback of outcomes information to improve the quality of the university's educational and service activities.

At the core of RMU's assessment program is a commitment to evaluate institutional effectiveness throughout the teaching and learning process and the environment that supports it. This encompasses both academic and student support areas.

#### **5. STRUCTURE OF THE OVERALL INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT EFFORT**

When fully implemented, RMU's assessment program will be an ongoing process of reviewing performance and achievement of goals across the range of University functions. Assessment information regarding the achievement of outcomes goals will be incorporated into existing decision points within the University to serve as the basis for the strengthening of institutional programs and performance. Middle States calls this linkage of course goals to program goals to institutional goals the "seamless chain" of assessment. A schematic diagram of the proposed assessment process is attached to this document as Appendix A.

The Robert Morris University Committee on Outcomes Assessment (COA) serves as the institution-level coordinating body for assessment. In addition to monitoring the assessment requirements of accrediting bodies and other regulators, the charge to this committee is to ensure that:

- all aspects of institutional performance are assessed;
- high-priority institutional goals, especially those crossing organizational lines, receive attention in the assessment process;
- assessment efforts are valid, meaningful and cost-effective;
- the assessment process has integrity;

- stakeholders in assessment have a voice in the process;
- results are appropriately documented and disseminated;
- the assessment effort supports the attainment of the University's goals; and
- the assessment effort and its consequences are consistent with the University's Mission and Vision.

While a few assessment instruments are centrally administered by Institutional Research, in general the devising of appropriate programmatic and departmental assessment processes, procedures, and instruments will be delegated to the administrative units of the University. Those who directly teach and administer ought to have the greatest knowledge of the information needs of their organizational units and the greatest input into the selection, administration and evaluation of appropriate assessment instruments.

To that end, it is highly desirable that existing RMU administrative structures and procedures be adapted to the purpose of outcomes assessment rather than creating an entirely new structure to govern the outcomes assessment process or imposing a process by administrative dictate. Middle States' *Outcomes Assessment Plans* (1998) states: "There must also be a shared commitment to ensuring that assessment is central to and integrated within the institution's regular activities, not added as a separate function performed by some other entity or by a new bureaucracy." For example, the state-mandated academic program review process provides an excellent framework and opportunity to utilize outcomes assessment in the periodic reexamination of the University's academic programs that is conducted in the normal course of its operations. Similarly, the curriculum and planning councils housed within each school provide a pre-existing administrative structure that could support individual outcomes assessment efforts.

However, it is also important that decentralization not obscure the need for consistency, effectiveness and accountability for the entire outcomes assessment process. To that end, each organizational unit must be held to the same standard for its assessment effort and the COA must have the overall responsibility for ensuring that the assessment effort is carried out at each appropriate organizational level. COA's overall coordination is also vital in addressing the emerging issues of assessment overload, poor instrument design, and problems with scoring tests and surveys.

The COA believes that outcomes assessment for the academic aspects (program, department and school) of RMU would be best served by placing overall administrative responsibility for it in the hands of the Academic Deans Council. This would ensure accountability for implementation of this Outcomes Assessment Plan. The overall responsibility for developing the assessment program for academic programs should be jointly vested in each school's administration and its curriculum and planning committees. Assessment in the core curriculum is addressed in the next section of this Plan. The Institutional Research Office of RMU would still administer general tests of knowledge in consultation with the COA. Academic support areas, student affairs and other areas of the University would be responsible for their own assessment efforts in consultation with their management, the COA and the Director of Institutional Research.

In the academic areas, each administration and planning/curriculum council would be responsible for development and oversight of an assessment program for each of its majors, departments, school and/or programs. Faculty representatives should be the majority membership of each council; they would be responsible for the design, direction and monitoring of progress in each assessment area. It would be helpful to have a member of COA who is a faculty member in that school also participate in this process for liaison purposes. Individual plans should be consistent with a University-wide template to be developed by COA that describes the purpose of assessment, the intended use of the data gathered, and the procedures for documenting and reporting the findings.

Student support services staff, student affairs, admissions and other administrative areas of the University must form outcomes assessment committees either in their individual areas of responsibility or by administrative unit. They must also follow the COA template for their individual outcomes assessment plans.

All individual outcomes assessment plans and instruments will be filed with the COA, which has been vested with overall coordination and monitoring responsibility for the University's outcomes assessment efforts.

## **6. ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING AT RMU: STRUCTURE AND PROCESS**

RMU's first responsibility per its Mission Statement is to provide quality educational programs. Because of this core responsibility, it is appropriate for the institutional assessment program to focus first on the effectiveness of its instructional programs in meeting institutional and programmatic goals for student academic achievement. The size and breadth of this effort, involving faculty in academic programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels throughout the University, will require significant lead-time for information-sharing, discussion, design and implementation. This section focuses on the structure and process of implementing and maintaining a program for the assessment of student learning at RMU.

### **A. Assessment in the Major Field**

RMU's existing outcomes assessment process has been inconsistent on gauging academic performance in students' major field of study. Student achievement in some disciplines has been gauged by standardized tests such as the ETS Major Field Test in Business and the PRAXIS teaching examination. The use of the Major Field Test in Business to make demonstrable improvements in teaching and learning in those majors has only just begun.

Institutional Research and the COA can and will do a better job of gathering, interpreting and disseminating the results of centrally administered tests, but the academic schools and departments must provide guidance as to whether these tests are appropriate measures of student achievement. If so, then plans can be formulated to address

deficiencies revealed by the test; if not, then alternative assessment instruments and/or procedures must be devised.

Each school, via its administration and its curriculum and planning councils, must develop an outcomes assessment plan for its majors by the beginning of 2002. These plans should be written using a consistent template to be developed by COA. The plan should examine the existing test instruments (if any) used to measure academic achievement in each of its majors. A recommendation must be made as to whether the assessment instruments should be retained, replaced or augmented. The individual plans should articulate how the test data will be analyzed and the results used for the improvement of teaching and learning and of program review. The template will set forth reporting and tracking responsibilities for the plan.

### **B. Assessment of General Education**

RMU is presently engaged in an assessment of its core curriculum under the aegis of the University-wide Undergraduate Curriculum Committee. This provides an excellent opportunity for constructing an assessment loop for the University's general education curriculum. The same standards and objectives described for the major fields should also apply to the general education course of study. The UCC should formulate and monitor the outcomes assessment process for general education, and make its recommendations for implementation to the Academic Deans Council, which will administer the outcomes assessment process.

The redesign of the general education component of the curriculum will no doubt be targeted to achieve certain educational outcomes, for example the development of critical thinking or demonstrable literacy in reading, writing, and oral communication. No one assessment measure is likely to be able to measure student attainment in all of these areas. Several assessment measures may have to be used to help determine how students perform relative to the various objectives stated above.

Some of the assessment measures will have to be administered to freshmen before their first semester at RMU and again after completion of the general education program (pre-post measures). Other measures will have to be administered on a more continuous basis throughout the student's four years or upon the completion of a certain component of the general education core. The Communications Skills evaluation program is a good example of this approach.

### **C. Institution-wide Assessment, Non-Academic Areas and New Initiatives**

In addition to assessment programs focused on assessment in the major and assessment of general education, Robert Morris University is concerned with overall student success and the extent to which the University is meeting broader goals relating to educational performance and student development.

The University's five year planning process provides an excellent framework for examining achievement and goal attainment. The new five year plan that will begin in 2002 breaks out goals by school in order to facilitate accountability. Institutional Research will support this process by conducting longitudinal student tracking system, cohort analyses of retention, persistence and graduation rates and the student characteristics and institutional factors related to these measures of student progress; analyses of time-to-degree and the student and programmatic factors related to these measures; and analyses of alumni perceptions regarding programs and institutional services and how they affected student academic progress and achievement. Institutional Research will also continue to coordinate the administration of University-wide testing programs in response to feedback from the academic areas of the University regarding the effectiveness of these tests to the overall assessment effort.

The academic support, career services and student affairs areas of the University have done a fine job of conducting outcomes assessment and using the resultant data to achieve continuous improvement in their operations. An overall plan should be developed to institutionalize these efforts and to ensure that they meet the Middle States criteria of being "systematic and thorough." Their plans could be developed by organizational unit at the administrative level that is most efficient and appropriate.

Middle States mandates outcomes assessment in the fiscal and planning areas of the University's operation. Business Affairs should prepare a plan that addresses the University's fiscal management, human resource management, physical plant, and other areas.

The COA recommends that approval for all new academic programs be contingent upon their possessing an outcomes assessment component from the beginning. These can be adjusted if need be by their school curriculum/planning councils based upon experience once the programs get started.

## **7. REPORTING AND DOCUMENTATION**

Accountability is a vital concept that accompanies an effective assessment effort. Each administrative component of the University must produce an annual report in narrative form (prepared by its administrator and sent to COA) that discusses the assessment activities conducted over the past year and what was learned from those activities. Any resulting changes in their programs as well as how assessment results would be used in future program planning should be reported. Additionally, each individual assessment instrument or initiative must be reported to the COA on the form attached as Appendix B. All departmental and University reports on assessment planning and implementation will be compiled and reviewed by the COA as part of its responsibility for monitoring the assessment of student learning and other University activities.

A critical component of the assessment program is a feedback loop informing the participating departments, instructors and others of information obtained through the

assessment process. The information garnered from the reports to the COA will be shared with the RMU community to foster improvements throughout the University.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The broad characteristics of Robert Morris University's assessment effort may be summarized as:

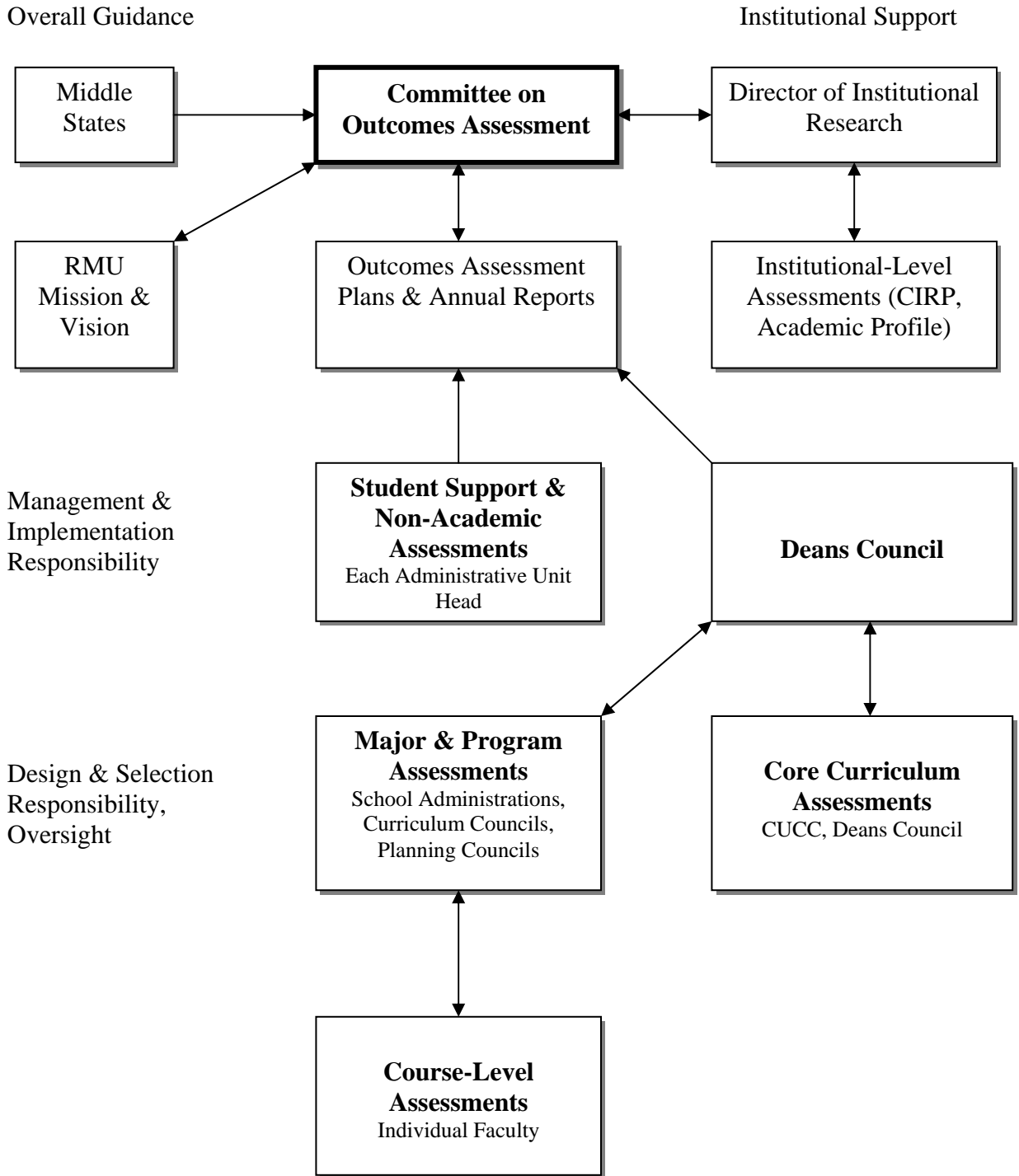
1. A comprehensive program assessing the effectiveness of all institutional functions with the highest priority placed on the assessment of student learning.
2. A participatory process involving all stakeholders, with administrative support to ensure that useful and useable results are achieved.
3. A process designed to be integrated with existing decision structures institution-wide and evaluated by its contributions to the understanding of student learning and to program review, planning and improvement throughout the University.

This plan outlines the principles and commitment behind the assessment program being developed at Robert Morris University. This program will be evolutionary and changes will undoubtedly be made as priorities on learning outcomes are reconsidered and the usefulness of the results from proposed assessment measures are evaluated. As assessment provides indications of progress or needs for change in one goal area, the focus may shift to other goals and other questions regarding achievement or effectiveness. As programs evolve, so do the assessment efforts that support them.

This is a time for renewal and reflection at Robert Morris University. An institution-wide academic program review cycle at RMU has just been completed; a new five year plan is in preparation; a Middle States Self-Study is presently being prepared; an extensive application for university status was successfully completed. Assessment activities and results must be a component of each academic program's self-study and peer review. The end result of this plan and our other efforts should be an institution actively concerned not just with what it does but also with how well it does it—and especially with how effective it is in ensuring individual student development and academic achievement.

Note: The COA acknowledges the invaluable role of New Mexico State University in the preparation of this document, which is based upon their clear, concise, pertinent and logical outcomes assessment plan.

**Appendix A**  
**The Outcomes Assessment Process at Robert Morris University**



## APPENDIX B

### Report Form Outcomes Assessment Instruments Committee on Outcomes Assessment

Person Completing Form: \_\_\_\_\_

RMU Organizational Unit: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Assessment Instrument: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Report: \_\_\_\_\_

RMU's Outcomes Assessment Plan requires the University's administrative units to report the following to the Committee on Outcomes Assessment:

1. Both qualitative and quantitative data and procedures used by each unit to evaluate its effectiveness.
2. The relationship of the results of outcomes assessment to decision-making for improvement.

Please complete the following questionnaire for **each** individual assessment measure employed and return it to the Chair of the Committee on Outcomes Assessment.

1. Have you, or any subordinates, administered (directly or via third parties) a survey or other means of data collection to any part of the RMU community (students, faculty, staff, alumni, employers, etc.)? "Survey" is a broad term encompassing questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, etc. involving multiple subjects.
2. Have you, or any subordinates, relied upon or utilized survey data to make changes in the University's teaching, learning or services?

**If the answer to either question above is yes, please complete the questions below. Use a new form for each individual survey instrument or incidence of data utilization for improvement.**

Questions pertaining to a survey:

3. What was the objective or purpose of the survey?
4. When was the survey conducted?

5. How was the survey conducted?
6. Who was the subject of the survey?
7. What survey instrument was used and what format did it use? (provide a copy if possible)
8. Was the survey one-time or is it ongoing?
9. What were the results of the survey?
10. Was there a report done on the results? (provide a copy if possible)
11. If so, who wrote the report and who received it?

Questions regarding the use of survey data at RMU:

1. Have any changes been made to teaching, learning or service delivery based upon survey results?
2. If yes, please describe the changes made.
3. If no, why weren't changes made?