

**INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS
BRIEF**

***A REVIEW OF THE UNIVERSITY'S
ELECTRONIC ANNUAL REPORT SYSTEM
JANUARY 2014***

***THE UNIVERSITY OF SCRANTON
PLANNING & INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICES***

About This Report

The University's electronic Annual Report System has been in operation since 2002. As the system passes its tenth year of service, and as we begin to develop a new strategic plan, the University Planning Committee (UPC) was charged to undertake a review of the system's current utility, and form a recommendation regarding its future. To complete this work, a subcommittee¹ of the UPC was formed in fall 2013; the subcommittee was expanded to include key staff who, although not part of the UPC, play a significant role in the tracking and reporting of assessment, planning, and institutional effectiveness in their home units. This group engaged in its review from September 2013 through January 2014.

Although the system is reviewed regularly by the Planning & Institutional Effectiveness Office, a more robust review was in large part prompted by concerns about the system that emerged during the University's 2013 Periodic Review Report for the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. The report examined progress related to recommendations to the University's 2008 self-study, and observed current strengths and challenges with respect to several essential University functions; these functions included planning & budgeting, institutional assessment, and student learning assessment. The University's electronic Annual Report System plays a role in each of these activities.

To guide the work of the Annual Report Review Subcommittee, this summary report document has been prepared. The document includes some historical information about the system, summary of evaluative findings about the system that have been gathered through the years, summary of key findings/challenges identified in the 2013 Periodic Review Report, and summary of evaluative findings of two campus surveys conducted in October 2013. The first of these campus surveys was submitted to all administrative department heads and academic department chairs and deans, all of whom are required to complete an Annual Report²; the response rate for this survey was 25%. A separate survey was sent to Vice Presidents to gather their insights about the system from their perspective. In addition to this work, a survey to identify other institutional trends regarding reporting software was conducted with members of the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS) and the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania (AICUP). This report summarizes the key findings from each of these research activities.

The findings and recommendations of the Subcommittee are included on page 10 of this report.

History of the Annual Report System

The University has been committed to annual reporting at the departmental level since 1998³. Annual reports were designed to serve in the following ways:

- The primary communication vehicle regarding a department's programs and services
- A retrospective, current, and prospective review of a department's plans, operations, outcomes assessment, and resource needs, including budgetary requests
- Used by vice presidents to determine future priorities and resource allocation

¹ The charge and membership of the subcommittee is attached.

² The survey was sent to 102 persons; 40 academic department chairs, and 62 administrative department heads. 27% of respondents identified as faculty chairs, and 65% of respondents identified as administrative heads. The remaining respondents were academic deans. The response rate for academic chairs was 18%; for administrative heads, 27%.

³For both administrative and academic units, following 1998 Middle States' self-study. Note that prior to this date, regular paper-based annual reporting was long conducted through the Office of the Provost.

- Link to the University's strategic plan, as appropriate

In the early years, these reports were prepared by academic and administrative units using a document template. In 2002, the electronic system was developed to replace this paper-based process. Although the content of the report structure was largely unchanged at the time, this new medium facilitated a web-based report submission process. The following early timeline records the evolution of annual reports in service of the above needs:

- 1998: annual reports extended to all departments
- 2000: linked to strategic plan
- 2001: included budget requests
- 2002: standardized electronic reporting
- 2003: increased emphasis on outcomes assessment for all departments; inclusion of facilities improvement requests.
- 2005: inclusion of assessment activities reporting section for academic programs⁴

In 2004, the role of the Annual Report System in coordinating this work became even more important, with the inception of the University's three-tiered Planning & Institutional Effectiveness Model. The model relies on the Annual Report process to serve as a critical component of the institutional effectiveness and assessment "feedback loop." The annual reports themselves serve as documented evidence that (1) the planning model is being implemented at the academic and administrative departmental, and college, level; (2) units are linking their departmental planning goals to the University's strategic plan and tactical plans, where appropriate; (3) this planning includes measurable outcomes, and is being linked to assessment & evaluation processes; and (4) this planning and assessment is linked to resource requests. The "funnel-up" approach to reporting, in which department heads' and chairs' reports are submitted to their supervisor or dean, and then to their vice president or provost, builds capacity for the appropriate linkage between departmental planning and planning happening at higher levels of the organization. Data and information reported in annual reports is reviewed by the Planning & Institutional Effectiveness Office for the purpose of gathering evidence of planning progress at the strategic level. The annual reporting process begins each April in effort to maintain alignment between report content and other University processes, in particular the annual budget development calendar.

All departments are required to submit a report each year; the departmental report essentially serves as the unit level (operational) plan. Reports are submitted to the department head's supervisor, and then to their divisional vice president, for review and approval. All Vice President's reports are made available to the President of the University; it should be noted that Vice Presidents prepare their own annual reports to the President outside of the system. All reports are accessible to the Office of Planning & Institutional Effectiveness, which analyzes the reports to monitor alignment between the three planning levels, and to inform strategic progress reporting. Each annual report reflects on the current year's goals and activities and sets goals and planned evaluations and assessments for the two forthcoming fiscal years. Dropdown menus allow report preparers to identify which theme(s) of the strategic plan and one or more tactical plans that each goal will support. In reporting evaluative and assessment

⁴ Note that this section was also available in administrative annual reports. However, over time, the section was made option in administrative reports to focus the section's use to student learning assessment, which is the direct responsibility of academic departments.

activity, departments have space to track measurements related to those activities, and identify how that information has been used for improvement. Requests for funding for departmental initiatives, and new position requests, must identify how the request ties to the strategic plan. This mandatory link from the annual report to funding requests effectively ensures consideration and planning. The standardization of funding requests enables University administration to systematically pull data across all units. A recent addition to the Annual Report System is the inclusion of a Faculty Hiring Plan for academic departments and programs; this plan is used by Academic Affairs to further inform faculty staffing needs.

How the Report is Managed & Supported

The system has been managed by the Planning & Institutional Effectiveness Office since 2012; prior to that, the system was managed by the Institutional Research Office and its predecessor, PAIRO from 2002 to 2012. An Annual Report Advisory Committee served between 2002 and 2008 to provide guidance on the technical maintenance of the system, until this work was fully operationalized into the Planning & Information Resources Division. The technical maintenance of the system is conducted by the ITDA department. Over the years, guidelines for academic and administrative departments have been maintained and shared with those charged with completing reports. Each March, a communication is sent to all of those charged with completing reports, identifying the report timeline, any changes to the report layout or process from the prior year, and offering training and support if needed.

In 2012, following the shift in management of the system from the Institutional Research Office to the Planning & Institutional Effectiveness Office, a new web information page was created. This coincided with updates to the University's web portal, where the access link to the system is housed; due to the nature of the data and information collected in the report, and the technological requirements of the current system, access to the system could not be moved to a public-facing web page. The [web information](#) page houses revised guidelines and instructions, links to useful resources, annually updated timelines, and technical requirements. A newly developed [orientation presentation](#) is also available on the page to all users; the presentation is shared with any new user directly. At one time, the Institutional Research Office provided annual data summary reports to each academic department directly, for use in developing their Annual Reports and supporting any program review process that may be occurring. However, this practice has changed; now, such data is distributed to departments upon their request.

What the Report Looks Like

The report is organized in such a way as to gather information related to activities in the prior, current, and upcoming fiscal year. The basic structure of the report is as follows:

- Section 1: Progress report for the current fiscal year (e.g., 2013-2014).
- Section 2: Revised plans for next (upcoming) fiscal year (e.g., 2014-2015).
- Section 3: Proposed plans for following fiscal year (e.g., 2015-2016).
- Section 4: Future plans beyond proposed plans (e.g., beyond 2015-2016).

Subsections of each area allow for the reporting of progress and assessment of goals, which rollover from year to year, and budget, staffing, and facilities improvement requests for the relevant fiscal year. It is important to note that the electronic report systemfor academic departments. Since academic departments and colleges have responsibility for assessing and reporting on student learning outcomes, the report serves as a collection point for data and

information related to that enterprise. The academic report also includes a supplemental section for the department's academic hiring plan, a section added by the Provost in 2008, and space to track annual scholarly activity by faculty⁵.

Findings

The system has been reviewed and evaluated regularly since its inception. Formal feedback surveys have been sent to users periodically through that period. The system is also discussed during annual reviews of the University's planning & institutional effectiveness model conducted by the University Planning Committee. The information gathered through these evaluations, and other general feedback received, has been used by the Institutional Research and Planning & Institutional Effectiveness Offices to make improvements to the system. The Offices have conducted general satisfaction surveys of the system in the past; however, this data has been used to make general improvements to the system and the processes that support it⁶ rather than a comprehensive look at its successes, limitations, and, most importantly, the degree to which the system has the capacity to serve our future needs as demands for integrated, sustainable, and evidence-based planning, institutional assessment, and student learning assessment will only increase. However, it should be noted that a number of concerns and suggestions for improvement could not be addressed due to the limitations of the technical construction of the system. Many of these unaddressed concerns reappear in this year's study, and are included in the general findings of this report.

Middle States PRR Report Findings

According to the 2013 PRR report, "Despite its strength as a coordination point for the information it collects, concerns about the system remain. Although the system serves as adequately in routing resource requests from departments and units, and to link those requests to planning objectives, the report may not serve as effectively as an assessment support tool. Another limitation of the current system is that, although it creates great opportunities for communication "upstream" (from departments to senior administration and administrative processes), it does not well facilitate communication "downstream," from those decision makers and decision points back to departments. Overall, "closing the loop" through communication remains a challenge for the University regarding each of the primary functions of the report: planning, institutional assessment, and budget decisions. The system is, quite simply, a tool that may be used to facilitate these processes, but does not replace the conversations that are essential to their success" (PRR, p. 46). Further, "it is also the case that the Annual Report System may not be utilized as robustly as it could be, and may not be the most effective tool for tracking assessment data in its great variety (PRR, p. 48).

Several related 2008 self-study recommendations, to which the PRR serves to summarize progress on, relate to the system. In particular, recommendations for which modest or little progress has been identified include:

⁵ It is important to note that the annual report is not the only place that faculty scholarly activity, and academic departmental assessment activity, is gathered and reported. Each college tracks assessment activity in different ways, and the Office of Research Services has an additional my.scranton portal link that enables faculty to submit scholarly activity directly throughout the year.

⁶ These include refining instructions; consolidating or eliminating sections of the report deemed redundant; creating a new "executive" reporting template for vice presidents and tactical planners; adding new sections, including a faculty hiring plan for academic departments, and a temporary business continuity analysis piece; and, in 2012-13, creating a new information web page for guidelines and materials and new user orientation presentation.

- The University should endeavor to provide consistent feedback and communications to budget preparers so that the ultimate decisions regarding resource allocation are better understood [Standard2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal]. (Self Study, p. 25).
- The administration should encourage departments to promulgate and review results of the various assessment efforts. Changes and improvements based on assessment results should be tracked in a systematic way. The budgeting process should give preference to changes based on assessment that align to the colleges' and University's processes for strategic planning. [Standard 7: Institutional Assessment]. (Self Study, p. 112).

In addition to these recommendations, others deal with how information related to institutional assessment and student learning assessment are reported and tracked in a systematic way. The Annual Report System, although not the only means through which such data is gathered, remains central to this process.

Summary of Current Findings

Competing Opinions & Needs

Current findings indicate that there is no one clear opinion regarding the role, and in fact utility, of the Annual Report System. Comments regarding nearly every aspect of the system studies (design/structure, navigation, completion process, information collected) show sometime widely varying opinions. For example:

- Many users wish the report was based more fully on narrative, rather than the current template/box form. Those wishing for more narrative space shared frustration with the character limits of certain sections. On the flip side, others feel that too much narrative is collected, and would like to see more emphasis on metrics, data, and succinct statements.
- 68% of departmental survey respondents believe that the report gathers the right things, but sources also indicate that the report is too long, and gathers too much information.
- Over time, the Planning & Institutional Effectiveness and Institutional Research Offices have gathered feedback that suggests users are not satisfied with how the system overlaps with other University processes (such as student learning assessment, faculty scholarly activity, individual service and professional development activities), forming redundancy or confusion; however, a number of suggested improvements over the years identify ways that the annual report connected more closely to other processes (such as performance management, program review).
- The degree to which what individuals hope to achieve in and with the annual report varies widely suggests that the current "one size fits all" template may be problematic. However, others cite the ability of the report to standardize data and information collection across departments to be of great value.

Common Concerns & Challenges

Despite some conflicting opinions, research does identify some common concerns those completing, and expected to use, the report experience. Regarding the *structure/layout*:

- The output of the system, which does not lend itself to utility. A number of comments observed that the report structure is not user-friendly. As summarized by one survey respondent, the report structure is “clunky and outdated.” Most department survey respondents (73%) observe that entering data into the system accounts for a large portion of the time spent preparing it, and that this is often duplicative effort; some comment that they tend to create the report content in a separate document/file, and then enter the data into the report template boxes.
- Frustrations with lack of ability to attach, upload, or enter important information or data that doesn’t fit the “canned” format of the interface. As one user remarked in a 2003 survey of the system, “the most negative aspect [of the system] was the format itself – it didn’t allow for a lot of flexibility or creativity from individual departments.”

Regarding the use/utility:

- By far, the most common concern with the use and utility of the system is that there does not appear to be much use, and the output option of the report is limited and not useful. Many users cite sharing the report with others in their department, and using it to inform their departmental planning, as the report’s most useful benefits, but this practice is inconsistent across user groups. For some, this is due to the “clunky” nature of the report output; as one user remarked, “try to print off a copy of the report and see what you get...I would not show this to my peers.” Users seeking to make use of the report’s content for other purposes are generally limited to copy/past information from the system into other documents or tools, like Excel.
- While 69% of respondents indicate that the process is used to inform departmental planning quite a bit or to some extent, nearly half of respondents believe the report is used not at all to inform divisional/tactical planning or institutional strategic planning.
- The Annual Report serves as a vehicle for departments, especially academic departments, to track assessment activity. About half of respondents (52%) found the report valuable or very valuable to report assessment activity. However, relatively few (25%) cite using the report to inform departmental assessment planning⁷.
- Few feel the system is leveraged effectively in informing decision making (specifically, planning and assessment activities), and many believe the reports are not used much at all. This is illustrated by a sense that the report is “a hoop to jump through without positive benefits” and “a lot of work for very little in return.”
 - The amount of time spent on the report varies. 42% of departmental survey respondents indicate they spend less than one typical working day (between 1 and 8 hours) on their report; 26% spend about 8 to 12 hours, and 39% spend eight or more hours.
- The lack of formal feedback loops regarding decisions made that the report is supposed to inform are very troubling to users. In particular, the perceived lack of formal feedback to submitted requests in the report (budget, staffing) further enforces opinions that the report is not effectively used, and that their true role to inform decision making is limited.
- 95% of respondents indicate that they use the report mostly to inform general planning in their department; 43 % use the report to inform staffing planning, 43% to inform

⁷ It is important to note that the program review process requires academic departments to identify student learning outcomes, and establish means of assessment and use of assessment in their courses and programs. The Annual Report System predates this practice, at least in the College of Arts and Sciences.

budget planning, and 38% program review activities. Many perceive that the report is not used much beyond the department.

- 60% believe that the report system is generally helpful in this capacity, and 73% share the report with others in their department.
- Regarding the degree to which the report informs conversations beyond the department, 64% of respondents discuss the report with their dean, supervisor, or vice president after submitting. Just over half say they discuss the report with this person *prior* to submitting.

Of selected elements of the system, departmental survey respondents value the annual overview/summary, setting of goals for the next fiscal year, and reporting general activities of the department to be among the most valuable. They value least the ability to set goals beyond the next fiscal year, and presenting an outlook of future trends, challenges or needs. Table 1 lists departmental survey respondents' value rating for selected aspects of the system:

Table 1: Value Ratings of Aspects of the Annual Report System

Aspect	Not Very Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Valuable	Very Valuable	N/A
Annual Overview/Summary	12%	4%	46%	39%	0%
Setting of goals for next fiscal year	8%	8%	58%	27%	0%
Setting goals beyond the next fiscal year	15%	46%	27%	12%	0%
Summarizing progress toward goals	12%	24%	44%	20%	0%
Reporting assessment activity	23%	15%	30%	19%	12%
Submitting budget requests	23%	12%	31%	23%	12%
Submitting staffing requests	23%	8%	50%	12%	8%
Reporting general activities of department	12%	27%	27%	31%	4%
Presenting outlook of future trends, challenges, or needs	8%	35%	39%	19%	0%
Reporting other departmental activities or accomplishments	15%	31%	27%	23%	4%

Table 2 lists departmental survey satisfaction rates with selected components of the report process. Of the elements, individuals are least satisfied with ease of navigation through and general layout of the system.

Component	Not Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Generally Satisfied	Very Satisfied	N/A
Communication explaining system	12%	32%	44%	8%	4%
Ease of ability to access system	8%	35%	46%	12%	0%
<i>Ease of navigation through system</i>	27%	23%	42%	8%	0%
<i>General layout of report structure</i>	46%	15%	31%	8%	0%
Clarity of directions for completing report	19%	19%	58%	4%	0%
Guidelines available	12%	8%	46%	4%	31%
Ability to add individuals as preparer/reviewer	4%	12%	58%	19%	8%
Timeline to complete	4%	39%	46%	12%	0%

General Conclusions

- Regardless of whether they are from an academic or administrative department, survey respondents indicate that *they wish to have a better sense of how the information they submit is used* in decision making, and, in particular, what happens to the staffing and budget requests they submit. As the Middle States PRR report observed, Vice Presidents do not handle this type of communication back to department leaders in a standard way. As one Annual Report System Evaluation respondent observed *regarding the report's use in guiding budget and staffing planning*, "the process by which departments handle budget, staffing, and other requests need to be standardized and unified...I usually find it easier and more fruitful to work outside the system. We would benefit enormously from a simpler, more open method of making needed requests." *Regarding how the report is used to inform departmental planning more broadly*, another observed that "I believe I accomplish more in a one-hour meeting with the dean and provost than I do with as many as 40 hours I've taken to put together the Annual Report. And much of what we talk about in person – some of the most important personnel and other matters – I would never write in a report."
- Most respondents seem comfortable with the type of information the system collects, but *find that the tool itself is difficult to work with*. Compounding this challenge, from a technical perspective, the current tool is end-of-life. Due to the way in which it was constructed, the system cannot accommodate significant changes, and even relatively small adjustments require complex programming. It is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to technically accomplish suggested changes or improvements.

- Current challenges in the report have led to concern by many, expressed in our Middle States' PRR report, that the tool *may not be the most effective tool, or have the capacity, to support key institutional planning, assessment, and related activities, in the future.* As is noted earlier in this report, demands for integrated, sustainable, and evidence-based planning, institutional assessment, and student learning assessment will only increase.

Summative Findings, Recommendations by the Annual Report Review Subcommittee

The Annual Report Review Subcommittee of the University Planning Committee reviewed this report, and identified the following key observations, and general recommendations. The group determined that the challenges facing the system fall into three categories: the limitations of the system structure and design; information and content; and lack of value/use. Specific strengths and weaknesses are listed below.

Strengths & Weaknesses of the System

Strengths	Weaknesses
Centrality, systematic collection of data across departments	Limited ability to gather data, vs. information (narrative)
Existence of the process, tool creates accountability; forces planning and assessment to occur and be documented	Tool itself not user friendly. Difficult to make needed changes; needs change and are dynamic, system is not.
Planning & assessment ties to budget, resource allocation	Low sense of value, enforced by little evidence that it reports are used after submission.
	Failure of capturing assessment in a robust way to the degree we need to
	Limited space/components that foster reflection
	Departments and divisions aren't completing or using the system in the same manner. The linear nature assignment of roles, and access, does not work well for some.
	Tries to capture too many things

Based on its analysis, the subcommittee offers the following initial recommendations:

- ***We need a new approach.*** The subcommittee concurs that the current tool has reached its end-of-life in terms of ability to serve the University's changing, varying reporting needs.

- ***We need to consider carefully the type of information we seek to collect, and why.*** The subcommittee observed that the answer to these questions is paramount, and should drive decisions about what annual reporting approach would best fit our needs.
- ***Annual reporting should be required for all departments.*** However, it should be recognized that the information that should be gathered from these units is variable and not always uniform. The need for centralized, standardized reporting and accountability needs to balance with the decentralized needs and practices of departments.
 - Some information (budget, staffing requests) are standard for all.
 - Depending on type of department, there is variation in types of information needed and desired, and potential variation in the timeline(s) best suited for collecting that information. For example, while the ability to “freeze” or take a “snapshot” of certain types of content is important, some pieces of the report might be left open on a rolling basis.
 - A single, standardized “box” template is not the best approach to serving this range of needs.
 - Revision of the Annual Report System may lead to opportunities to consider other types of information/reporting that is collected by other units that could be usefully combined into a single reporting interface. What is the current, and potential future, relationship of the system to other reporting processes on campus?
- Revision of the Annual Report System, which currently offers the only University wide, standard method for tracking of student learning assessment activities in academic departments, ***requires a conversation about the best means/tool to gather student learning assessment data in a standard, systematic fashion.***
- ***The tool should support, not drive, the process.*** Greater flexibility in accommodating the information determined to be necessary should be possible.
- ***External software is attractive in some ways, but the group recognizes it may be too much for what we really need.*** A “do everything” software suite may not be the best fit for the University’s annual reporting needs as an overall strategy. Selected components or areas might be of value, but the group feels a simpler, home grown interface would be a better fit.
- ***Making the process more useful is critical.*** Regardless of the tool/system used in the future, one of the biggest challenges facing the current system that must be overcome is the perceived lack of use, and thus value, of the process itself. Adjusting or replacing the system alone cannot solve this problem. Ensuring the right persons have appropriate access is essential.
 - Attention must be paid to creating useful output of information, as much as input.
 - Creating opportunity for those submitting to reflect and draw conclusions on information submitted is important to “closing the loop” for various assessment and improvement purposes.
 - We must identify ways to facilitate greater use of information gathered, demonstrate how the information has been used in decision making, and create essential feedback loops to various pieces (in particular, resource requests).

Annual Report System Subcommittee: 2013-14

Charge

The Annual Report System Subcommittee, a subcommittee of the University Planning Committee, is charged with reviewing the current University Annual Report System, both in terms of content and use. The Annual Report System is a key piece of the feedback loop of the Planning & Institutional Effectiveness Model, and the subcommittee is to consider the viability of the system given our current institutional assessment needs. The subcommittee will form and make recommendations regarding the future improvements, or replacement, of the system.

Membership & Reporting Relationship

The subcommittee is formed from members of the University Planning Committee. The subcommittee is chaired by the Director of Planning & Institutional Effectiveness, and will report its findings and recommendations to the Vice President for Planning/CIO. A preliminary report/recommendation is expected by the end of the fall 2013 semester; and a final report/recommendation by March 1.

Members

Ms. Kate Yerkes, Chair
Dr. Bill Wallick, Faculty, PCPS
Dr. John Deak, Faculty, CAS
Ms. Lauren Rivera, Student Affairs
Ms. Valerie Taylor, Institutional Research
Ms. Patti Tetreault, Human Resources
Mr. Ray Schwenk, PCPS
Ms. Rebecca Haggerty, CAS
Mr. Pat Donohue, Finance

Agenda for 2013-14

- Evaluate the perceived value and effectiveness, and limitations, of the current system, in whole or in part (consider use by departments, user experience)
- Consider the role of the tool with respect to current planning and assessment/evaluation reporting needs for academic and administrative departments.
- Consider the role of the tool as a mechanism for collecting annual departmental budget and staffing requests.
- Consider other process improvement tools and strategies that may improve the annual reporting system and process (e.g., elements of program review)
- Form recommendation to VP Planning/CIO regarding future of system, or proposed alternative(s).