The Ad Hoc Assessment Task Force met on June 3, 2011 in the BPS Building from 1-2:30 pm

**Major Concern of Assessment Task Force**

It is vital that MSU takes immediate action to preserve its national and international reputation and immediately take a leadership position regarding student assessment. MSU must take the initiative on exam security, and make conditions less arduous for instructors, especially for online testing. While this has been neglected since online courses and online exams were created decades ago, we’ve all heard stories about how easy it is to cheat on online exams. There are reports from students and in the media. For example, one student’s “studying” for an online assessment was sticky notes with answers strategically placed around their desk; another student reports enrolling for online courses because “they are easier, since you can cheat on the exams and get an A in using the index”. In the media, online classes are often described as unequal to their in-class counterparts because of online testing and cheating. In fact, students in pre-professional fields (e.g. pre-medicine and pre-dental) are discouraged from taking online classes by medical and dental schools’ advisors. In addition, federal regulators and regional accreditation bodies have noted these trends and have responded with increased scrutiny on academic integrity in online learning.

So far, MSU has been fortunate that the media has not exposed examples of cheating in online testing of MSU students. To maintain our reputation, we must have equivalent procedures for student assessment, whether the student is taking exams online or by any other means (e.g. in an MSU classroom, in a proctored environment at a testing center, etc). Commitment to the integrity of student assessment and grades will require significant investment by the University, including establishing and operating a large scale testing facility, described below (on pages 2 and 3).

**Meeting Summary**

The members agreed that to be most effective the initial focus of the task force should be on the security and reliability of assessments in online courses, whether those assessments are conducted in proctored settings on campus, or at locations distant from East Lansing. More specifically, how do we provide equivalent security for exams being offered online and exams offered in-class? The question is especially important for courses in which exams online are also offered relatively unchanged in a proctored in-classroom setting.

There was consensus that it is imperative to resolve the problems of verification

1. of students’ identity (that the student taking the test is the student enrolled in the class)
2. that students did not have access to materials that were not allowed during the exam

The Task Force also agreed that student assessment procedures should equivalent for a given course (whether online or face-to-face).
**Principle of Identity Confirmation:** If a course uses objective methods of assessment (tests that may or may not be timed, but that use multiple choice questions, short written answers, or more lengthy essays) it should use test settings and methods that require verification that the student receiving grades for exams is the student that did the work, and the student did not use any sources or materials that were not permitted during the exam.

**Principle of Horizontal Equity:** In addition, the task force strongly recommends that in any given course that is given online that the assessment procedures are equivalent to the procedures used in the otherwise equivalent face-to-face course. Assessment procedures should be independent of the mode of instruction.

Proctored examinations can resolve problems 1 and 2 above (on page 1), but create a burden for the students and the instructors of online classes. Students could have to travel long distances for exams or instructors would have to set up alternate, secure exam sites in multiple locations. To prevent online classes from becoming unequal to their in-class counterparts, we propose Michigan State University creates a system of testing centers for online classes and provides support for secure, proctored exams for online classes by the following (1-3):

1. Creation of a large scale MSU testing facility (see also page 3) would be one of the first steps in demonstrating MSU’s commitment to online classes and student assessment. We propose that any new, large MSU building includes plans for this testing facility. The University should create an administrative office that would manage the facility and provide staff, including proctors.

2. In conjunction with working to create a new, large scale MSU testing facility, MSU should create an association or network of testing centers that would serve students that are not near MSU. The system could be similar to the Consortium of College Testing Centers, however, it would need to be more extensive (hopefully, eventually become global) and students should not be charged for examinations. Task Force members mentioned that CIC might be another starting point for creating this association of universities with reciprocity for its members. There should be administrative support for courses whose faculty will be allowing alternate testing sites. Arrangement for exams at alternate sites should be provided by the administrative office that manages the testing facility.

3. MSU should also create testing locations that would serve the most MSU students at a distance from campus. These testing locations would likely be in Grand Rapids and Detroit. This could be similar to the procedure that BMB 401, PSL 250, and ISP 203A are using in Summer of 2011 (and have used a few previous summers). In these courses, MSU proctors are sent to Grand Rapids and the Detroit area to proctor exams in rented classrooms. Arrangement for exams at alternate sites, including proctors, should be provided by the administrative office that manages the testing facility.
Notes from the meeting:

The discussion focused on two topics. One was a universally supported proposal to create an MSU testing facility on campus that would support the administration of online tests for all departments and schools. The other topic was how to manage assessments for students enrolled in online courses and programs, and who are not present in East Lansing.

1) MSU testing facility.

MSU should establish an online, large scale online testing facility that would support secure, proctored computer assessments for all departments and schools. The center should be on a large scale that could handle both large and small class sections, and operate with generous hours that would correspond to at least the existing meeting times for classes, roughly 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on days the university is open.

Precedents for setting up super-sized computer labs exist on other university campuses. Virginia Tech has for many years supported the "Math Emporium," a converted K-Mart adjacent to their campus that handles exams for online math courses. See http://www.emporium.vt.edu/. The Emporium is open to students 24/7 while the semester is in session. While the Math Emporium was designed as both a laboratory space and an assessment space, the space we propose for MSU would be solely an assessment facility. The computers provided in the space could be configured to provide an appropriate level of test security, such as denying access to the Internet, and to other outside means of communication such as e-mail. The facility might also support the capability (staff and computers) to monitor students using webcams as “remote proctors” during exams. (Note: the task force is reviewing this technology’s use in student assessment)

The task force sees the establishment of a large scale facility to support online assessments as an important complement to face-to-face course offerings, and not only a facility to promote online instruction. Many face-to-face course instructors in larger course sections would benefit greatly from the ability to give proctored online exams in secure settings. For example, it is increasingly difficult for faculty who teach large courses to schedule rooms during their examination times (rooms are simply not available). This dictates that students sit next to each other (no seat between students) during exams of more than 500 students. Obviously, this is poor testing environment and should be changed.

2) Assessment of distant students in online courses.

The most lengthy discussion concerned how to conduct appropriate assessment of students in online courses who live at a great distance from campus (e.g., more than 75 miles).

The assessment of students in online courses, whether distant or not, should conform to a larger set of standards and rules for courses in general. For example, assessments should be consistent with the learning objectives of the course in question. In some fields this means the administration of timed, objective exams in proctored settings. Courses in undergraduate
mathematics, physics, chemistry, statistics, and economics come to mind. In other fields, assessment of whether learning objectives are met can be more subjective, and may not involve any timed, proctored exams at all. Courses in music, studio art, creative writing, and design come to mind. And, of course, some kinds of courses may involve both kinds of assessments. In all cases, the overriding principle should be that, for a given course, the assessment methods and instruments should be the same for all modes of instruction, face-to-face, online, or hybrid.

The task force is acutely aware that online courses might well administer exams that are not online, and that may consist of printed pages, and require handwritten answers. Any distant assessment arrangements must have the flexibility to handle both paper and online administration of tests.

**Principle of Identity Confirmation:** If a course uses objective methods of assessment (tests that may or may not be timed, but that use multiple choice questions, short written answers, or more lengthy essays) it should use test settings and methods that require verification that the student receiving grades for exams is the student that did the work, and the student did not use any sources or materials that were not permitted during the exam.

**Principle of Horizontal Equity:** In addition, the task force strongly recommends that in any given course that is given online that the assessment procedures are equivalent to the procedures used in the otherwise equivalent face-to-face course. Assessment procedures should be independent of the mode of instruction.

**3) Providing distant assessment facilities.**

At present, the responsibility for setting up secure testing for distant students enrolled in online courses fall on the department offering the course, or, in many cases, the individual instructor of the courses. One of the task force members is currently (in summer of 2011) arranging alternate testing in college testing offices for students more than 100 miles away from the course testing locations in East Lansing, Grand Rapids, and a Detroit suburb. It requires at least one hour per location to set things up, doing such things as: talking to the testing office manager about their exam procedures, checking on testing office hours and student’s availability during that time, writing instructions for the proctor, writing instructions for the student. Another time drain is that for exam security, it is best to have a separate exam (totally different exam questions) for the alternate locations.

In most online undergraduate courses, especially those offered during the fall and spring semesters, the vast majority of the students (more than 90%) reside in the Greater Lansing Area. Of those residing outside the Greater Lansing Area, say more than 75 miles from East Lansing, the majority of those remaining reside in the State of Michigan. So solving the problem of secure testing in online courses should initially center on providing testing facilities within the State of Michigan and, over time, should expand to other areas of the country and world.
MSU should set up an office to administer the testing facility which will also deal directly with the administration of proctored exams at alternate sites for students taking online courses but do not reside near MSU.

**Michigan Assessment Network:** In order to meet the objectives stated under the previous section, the task force recommends that MSU take a leading role in setting up a cooperative consortium of community colleges, colleges, and universities in Michigan that would offer assessment services to distant students in taking online courses. The consortium would need to include a large number of community colleges, private colleges, and universities within Michigan who would provide secure testing facilities and expanded operating hours on a reciprocal basis to consortium members. These testing facilities should be operated in such a way that the costs are shared among the members. Students should not be charged extra fees in order to take distant exams at these centers.

In short, MSU needs a "logistics layer" to assist units and faculty in arranging secure online exams at distant locations.

The existing National College Testing Association Consortium of Distance Testing Centers would constitute a first step in the direction of what the task force is recommending, but fall short of our expectations in several respects.

a) The NCTA Consortium has only a small number of member institutions in Michigan, and the hours of many of them are not robust enough to handle many students’ needs.
b) The NCTA Consortium charges for each test administered by a member, and there is currently no convenient institutional way to pay for the test administration. Currently, either the student pays him or herself, or individual departments must arrange to either pay the fee, or refund it to the student.

**CIC Assessment Network:** The task force recommends that the appropriate CIC committees and subcommittees should work toward providing at CIC institutions what we are recommending for Michigan, so that students enrolled in any CIC institution's online courses could take proctored examinations at other CIC institutions at no extra charge.

**Expansion of Testing Network for online classes:** The ultimate goal should be including colleges and universities throughout the globe in the testing network. Online classes then could be international, but still have high student assessment standards. This arrangement would be mutually beneficial for all colleges and universities that offer online classes in the network.