August 29, 2003 Explanation of Michigan State University's Outreach Measurement Instrument (DRAFT) and its pilot testing

The purpose of the Outreach data collection process is to allow us to specify both how much effort the University expends on outreach & engagement and how that effort is distributed among such pressing issues as preK-12 education, environmental preservation, public safety, etc. and among the various kinds of outreach activity (off-campus instruction, museum exhibits, applied research, etc). We want to have data to justify statements about the University's immediate contributions to improving outcomes for our state and its citizens.

Part I

In keeping with MSU's understanding of outreach as an aspect of the scholar's work in teaching, research, or service rather than activity that forms a distinct and separable function with a distinct and separable time allotment, the Outreach Measurement Instrument (OMI) starts by asking the respondent to specify the percentage of his/her teaching, research, and service work has a significant outreach component. Thus many answer this question by identifying the time they spend teaching classes off campus or conducting collaborative applied research as time expended in outreach.

This same question also appears on the institution's Faculty Effort Form (this data element will be linked in the institution's data base). On the FEF faculty are asked to allocate 100% of their time among several types of activity (teaching, advising, research, administration, committee work, etc.) and then are asked, having allocated 100% of their time, what portion of that 100% was expended on conducting those activities for the direct and immediate benefit of audiences external to the academy.

The values given for question 1 of the OMI form the basic quantitative measure of an academic unit's or the whole institution's commitment to engagement. That percentage is multiplied against the respondent's salary which we then take as a marker for the University's investment in outreach. The remainder of the OMI seeks to develop a more fine-grained set of quantitative and qualitative descriptors of the nature of the institution's outreach effort.

Part II

We wish to obtain quantities of outreach activity across two dimensions: 1) kind or type of outreach ("form") and 2) the kind of issue to which the activity was targeted ("area of concern"). [Originally we had sought to capture effort expended across a third dimension: the people or group with whom the faculty collaborated in carrying out their outreach activity. This proved to be more complex for those completing the form than the amount of information gathered justified so we dropped this third dimension.]

The first section of part 2 of the OMI focuses on identifying the issues on which faculty spent time and on specifying the type of activity in which they engaged while doing so. We decided that the most important figures to report beyond the institution's overall expenditure was the distribution of effort among pressing issues and therefore decided that it rather than type of outreach would be the primary cutter.
We developed a list of pressing issues ("areas of concern"), relying on the list of committees in

the state legislature, the chapter titles in a Public Sector publication, and our own experience over time with Michigan constituents. The list of areas of concern was designed to provide all faculty in a complex institution (from sculptors to chemists to speech therapists to landscape architects) opportunities to include their activity without creating a nearly endless list. In our pilot tests we also included an "other" category for those who thought their work did not fall under any of the listed areas. Approximately 20% of the respondents chose to categorize their work by a name different from those offered. Most often that name was simply a subarea of one of the listed areas or the name of the project on which they were working. It proved relatively simple to fit the "other" responses into the provided categories as we reviewed the pilot test data. The one problem area concerns "law" and "policy." Our intention was to have those engaged in the policy making or policy analysis or legal analysis process to choose as their area of concern the focus of the policy or legal process with which they were working – someone working on medicare `reform would identify "Health and Health Care" as their area of concern; those working on charter school policy, "Education: Pre-Kindergarten-12." Clearly many of those who tested the instrument did not find that method very congenial and instead used the "other" category to identify their work as "policy analysis" or simply "policy." Because we do not intend to have an "other" category in the final version of the instrument, we believe that this will not be a major problem. However, the goal of driving responses to the substantive issue that the policy concerned did exclude some political scientists (and possibly others) whose work concerns policy or laws specifically related to the process of governing – electoral reform, for example. We are working to develop an area of concern title that would include electoral law and legislative training but exclude prison privatization policy and welfare reform.

The list of six (originally five) forms of outreach was developed over several years with a group of faculty advisors from across the University. This list also seeks to provide a rubric under which any faculty member's outreach activity can be counted. In early test versions of the instrument we listed five forms of outreach and their 14 subcategories (credit and not for credit instruction under outreach instruction; credit course based service learning, academic major based internship, field experience, or practicum, and volunteer activity, not part of a formal academic program under Student Experiential/Service Learning; and so on). We also asked respondents to choose one of the 14 as the primary form of their work and as many of the other 13 as they wished as the secondary forms. This too proved to generate confusion because the subcategory definitions were not always clearly distinct, because respondents sometimes read the subcategory out of the context of the overall form (thus volunteer activity lost its association with student learning and was used to designate volunteer activity on the part of the faculty). The effort also lengthened and complicated the form significantly. None of the data from the pilot test justified the length and confusion. Therefore we are revising then instrument back to the original short list, separating credit and not-for-credit instruction, for a total of six forms.

We assumed that many faculty members engage in outreach activity in more than one area of concern. Therefore, we constructed the form to allow them to respond to the remaining quantitative questions in regards to their activities in two areas of concern. Some faculty operate in more than two areas, but we feel that more than two columns would make the form too complex. In fact, in our pilot tests of the form respondents assigned over 95% of their outreach effort between their two chosen areas of concern.

At one point we listed “urban” and “international” as areas of concern, but we came to believe that they, like “policy” cut across almost all the areas of concern and would confuse respondents and our analysis if they remained among the areas of concern. Therefore, we used questions 4 and 5 to get at urban and/or international focus of the faculty’s work. Thus, we can report urban or international involvement across all areas of concern or within any one of them (how much outreach to preK-12 education had an urban focus? What percentage of faculty outreach effort concerning natural resources and the environment was directed internationally?

A question asking for the number of people participating in the outreach programs and activities has proved to be troublesome because of the wide variety of outreach activities being counted. We sought the number of those directly affected–those with whom the faculty personally interacted or who read or viewed or otherwise used an outreach product (extension bulletin, online short course). We did not want estimates of the number of people who indirectly benefitted from their outreach activity–such as when an intervention developed in collaboration with an agency in one city was subsequently disseminated to others without the continuing participation of University faculty. The wording of the question appears in the pilot tests to have gathered the kind of numbers we were seeking (but we haven’t tested the form with Extension personnel as yet).

One of the roles of University Outreach and Engagement is communicating to the citizenry of our state not only how much the University is engaged but where in the state that engagement is occurring. Therefore, we needed precise information about the locations of outreach effort in Michigan – to the county and city level. After repeated trials of questions that confused respondents and produced imprecise results, we decided to ask each respondent to first characterize the breadth of focus of his/her outreach work–not primarily focused on Michigan, focused statewide, focused on a region or metropolitan area, or focused on one or a few counties or cities. Respondents choosing either of the latter are asked to identify the specific places from drop down menus. While this strategy inevitably omits specificity about non-Michigan outreach (such as Great Lakes focus), it will give the data we need to maintain our web- and print-based reports to the state and its legislators about MSU presence in each geographic areas of the state.

One of the most perplexing of the questions is a distillation of much bigger efforts to gather financial data on the University’s outreach effort and its impact. Initially we hoped to create reports not unlike those produced by our office of Contracts and Grants detailing the external funds coming to the University as a result of faculty research endeavors. We originally sought an expenditure/revenue budget that would detail costs of each outreach project – including salaries of university personnel involved beyond the faculty (graduate students, student labor, support staff) and costs of university services (room rental, computer time, printing, etc.). On the revenue side we sought information about the amount of cash and its source coming to the University to support the project as well as an estimate of in-kind support the project was receiving from the external collaborators. We thought of outreach activities paralleling externally funded research projects and hoped to get the kind of information that would be included in a grant application. Our tests revealed that most of the faculty engaged in outreach did not think of their work that way at all. We found that many resented our effort to attach dollar amounts to “doing good.” Except for those whose outreach effort was externally funded by an agency requiring audits, most simply did not keep track of the figures we sought. Therefore, we have decided to collect fewer and less detailed figures. As explained earlier, we will use the salary equivalents of faculty FTE involved in outreach as the measure of expense, and the amount of cash coming into the University for the activity as the measure of revenue. We will not seek to measure in-kind contributions.

A second financial question is really an impact question. We want to know if the faculty member's work with institutions external to the University helped those institutions secure support for their work from other sources.

Part III

The third part of the questionnaire asks respondents to provide even more detailed description of their outreach work or a particular facet of it. We included this section so that we could collect material that can be used to tell the University's outreach story in as concrete and vivid terms possible. Although we would like to have as many complete this section as possible, we made it voluntary so as not to discourage from at least filling out the quantitative sections. We predict that those faculty with the greatest investment in outreach will be most likely to give us the detailed descriptions and it is those descriptions which are most suitable for "telling the story." Respondents get the option of describing their outreach work as a whole, describing the work they do in one area of concern, or describing a single outreach project. Thus we avoid having to define a "unit" of outreach. For example, a person who advised police departments in eight different cities about community policing may define that work as eight different projects or as a single project.

After the paragraph of description, the next questions seek to get at the scope of the outreach work: how extensive the network of external and internal collaborators and the length of the effort. Asking whether other academic units sponsored or participated in the work is intended to give us an indication of the level of how interdisciplinary the University's outreach work is. We also ask for a breakdown of those involved with the respondent in delivering the work so that we can develop a sense of the people resources assisting the faculty member and an idea, however partial, of the numbers of non-academic staff, graduate students, and undergraduate students involved in outreach.

The final questions ask for a description of the impacts of the work, giving some probes suggesting the kind of evidence we are seeking. We separated this question from the one about formal evaluation so as not to keep respondents from providing answers to the outcomes question. We did not want to suggest that we only wanted to know about impacts that were certified by a formal evaluation. Although wording the question gently so as not to suggest criticism of faculty work, we do ask for evaluative evidence. We also include sustainability as a measure of impact, since continuation of an outreach project or group of related outreach projects indicates that the external collaborators and the external audience to whom the effort is directed perceive it as useful. If they do not, they are unlikely to continue using their time and resources to work with the University.