

Response to the Commission statement on Assessment of Student Learning (February 21, 2003): The Process of Making Outcomes Assessment a part of the UNL Culture

Background

UNL had just begun to enact a plan with the goal of linking outcomes assessment (OA) to respected cultural practices of the institution when it began to prepare for its accreditation visit in 1997. The NCA team at that time stated that OA at UNL was “relatively new and thus relatively fragile” because we were just beginning to determine how to not only engage in an exercise of data collection but also to make OA a part of our culture whereby the data collected would be used.

Prior to the 1999 NCA Focus Visit progress in our efforts had occurred but it was clear that our goal of building a sustainable commitment had not yet been attained. UNL had established a positive environment as noted by the Focus Visit Team:

“(UNL) has been attentive to creating a healthy environment for assessment (by) showing sensitivity and respect for college and faculty autonomy, disciplinary differences, and issues of use and access to assessment data”

However, the Focus Visit team was also clear that this was still a work in progress by stating that although all academic departments were engaged in assessment activities they were at varying levels of development and systematically there had not been a broad use of the results of assessment to effect change.

That Focus Visit was followed by some additional activities and by the time UNL submitted a progress report to HLC/NCA in 2002 we had evidence that the number of academic units implementing assessment plans and using assessment data had increased considerably for both undergraduate and graduate programs since the 1999 Focus Visit.

Developmental approach

Much progress has been made in OA since the focus visit. OA is now a reality on this campus and is part of the on-going way of operating within almost all academic units. To accomplish this UNL has operated on a combination top-down, bottom-up approach to making OA an integral part of its institutional culture. We have taken the road of “building a sustainable commitment” by trying to educate units and their faculty and staff about the needs, purpose, and value of using evidence about student learning to make program decisions. We have continually evaluated and then refined the structure for

increasing how OA is incorporated into who we are as an institution. This process has taken place both within the university as a whole and within individual academic units.

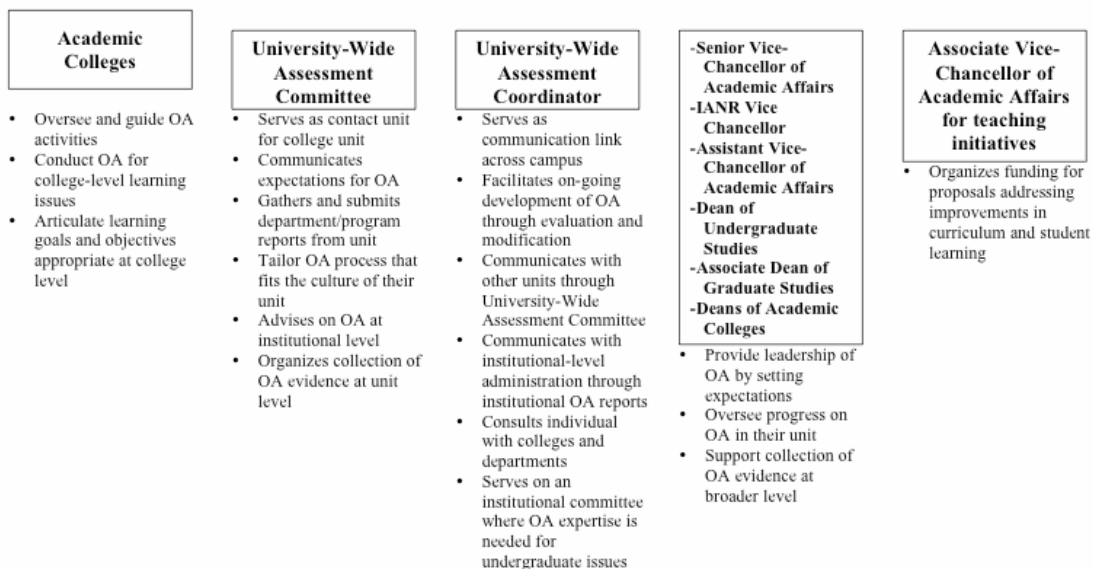
Success has been attained in large measure because strategies have been adopted to encourage individual colleges and departments to weave OA into their structures and practices on their own terms. We see this approach as the key to allowing OA to transform our culture instead of it becoming just an inconsequential addition.

From the top has come the vision of integrating OA into our work. From the individual units have come the plans for doing this. Each college has developed strategies for development and implementation that fit its disciplines, traditions, and goals. Conducting OA to bring about curricular and instructional change is thus the responsibility of faculty in colleges, departments, and programs. College, departments, and programs are expected to assess the learning progress of students in their undergraduate majors, graduate programs, and their general education courses with processes and methods that make sense for their unit. Those efforts are then supplemented with assessments of the educational experience conducted at the institutional level.

This top-down, bottom-up approach has been very effective in changing the perception of OA from “something we have to do” to “something we do.” It has resulted in assessments being done in ways that are most appropriate for individual programs and thus more likely to continue and to be used. Approximately 80% of all programs have made important steps in making OA an important part of how they operate. Discussion about learning is now taking place in a much more sophisticated way than in years past. The look of OA reports is diversified, but there is strong positive contact and coordination between units and higher levels of administration. Nevertheless, there is still work to be done.

Four individuals or groups support OA activities in the academic colleges. They are the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator, University-Wide Assessment Steering Committee, institutional- and college-level administrators, and, in place of the former Teaching and Learning Center, the Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs for teaching initiatives.

How OA is supported at different levels



What we have learned about OA through this approach

1. Progress toward implementing OA is best made when the focus is on faculty in small groups based on their disciplinary orientations.
2. Using approaches that fit with disciplinary traditions allows faculty to put things in their own language.
3. Including faculty members on key committees enables them to interpret ideas both to the committees and from them.
4. Letting each college develop the approach that works for its context increases the responsibility that faculty take for the process.
5. Peer review is a valuable technique in developing capacity of faculty and raising the quality of the assessment program used.
6. Faculty given the right support are interested in talking about learning in their instructional programs and how to improve it.
7. You must give OA time to develop. If you push it too fast it will not become a part of the culture.

What's next in the continuing development of OA?

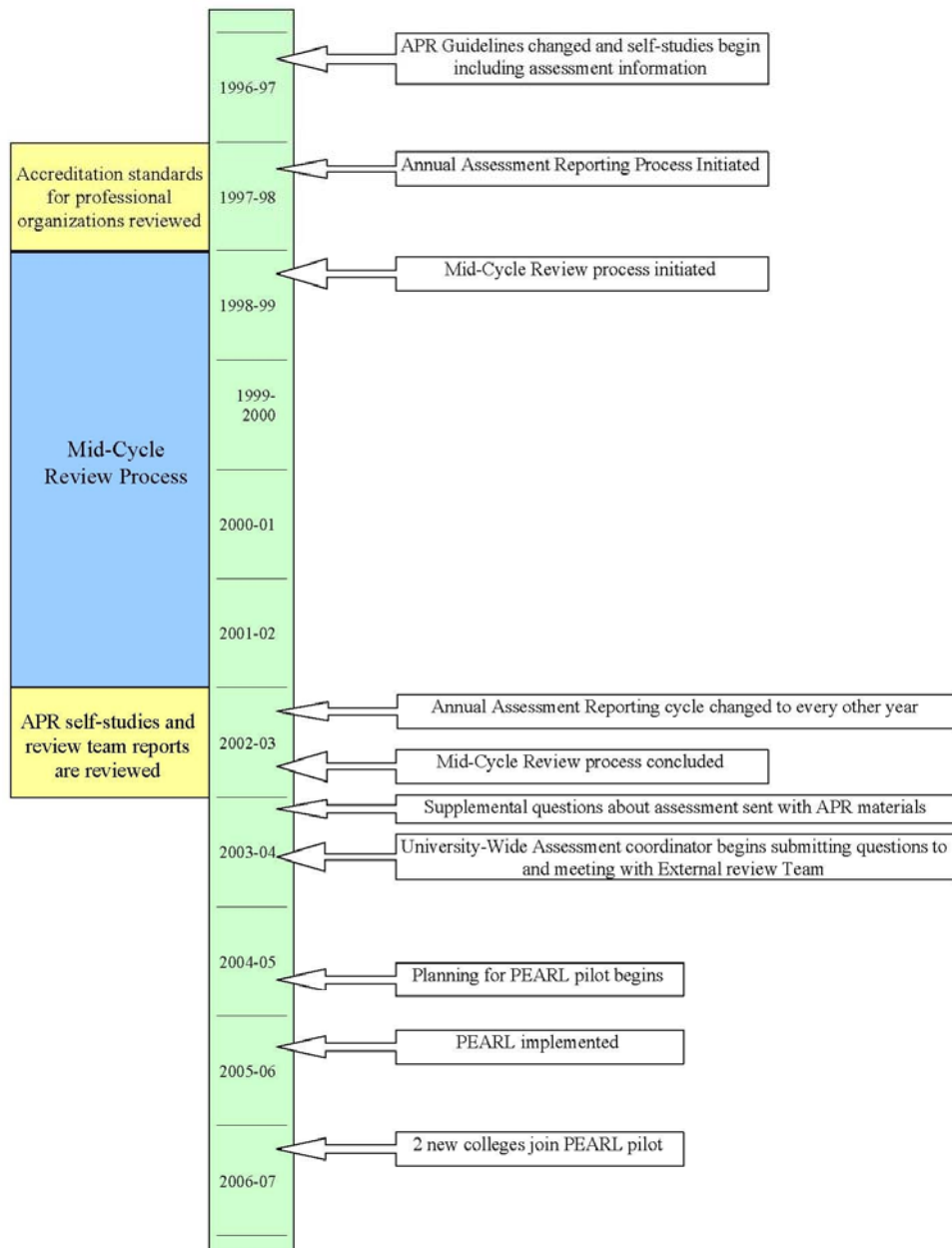
1. The institution along with each college and department needs to put in place structures to support ongoing discussion about student learning that fit into the rhythm of the academic year.

2. We need to learn how to talk with constituents, including policy makers, about what we are doing in OA.
3. We need to learn how to help those areas that are laggards in their development.
4. We have to sustain the momentum that has been developed and continually promote more sophisticated thinking about how and why we engage in OA.
5. We need to encourage more pervasive conduct and use of direct measures of student learning.

Development of the work to establish OA over the last ten years

A series of steps have been taken over the last ten years to establish OA in the culture of UNL. This has definitely been a developmental process with each step building on the previous.

Academic Program Review (APR) & Reporting Timeline



Academic Program Reviews Academic Program Reviews (APRs) serve as the primary process for evaluating educational programs and academic departments at UNL. The APR involves the unit preparing a self-study and hosting a visitation team that prepares a report. The results of the APR contribute to decisions about reallocation of resources, program changes, and possible re-direction of program efforts. APR self-study guidelines

were revised to include guidelines related to OA and initiated for programs undergoing review starting in fall 1996. UNL's Academic Program Review guidelines can be found www.unl.edu/resources/SD-1a.

It became clear from a 2002-03 review of program APR self-study and review team reports, however, that more emphasis on OA was needed in the APR process. To accomplish this a document was developed where the APR guidelines regarding OA were identified and their intent was described. This document included questions for the department members to consider as they prepared their self-study.¹ These questions were to guide departments in creating a stronger connection between their curriculum and instructional practices and evidence of student learning in the evaluation of their program. Beginning in fall 2003 this document was included in materials sent by Office of the senior vice chancellor for academic affairs as a program begins preparing for its APR. Another change made at the same time was increasing the involvement of the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator. The coordinator began submitting questions about assessment for the external review team to consider and meeting with APR review teams during their visit to campus.

Program accreditations The process of external accreditation by professional organizations is similar to the evaluation that occurs in APRs. In 1997-98, the standards of several major professional organizations that accredit programs at UNL were reviewed to determine whether those standards aligned with the HLC/NCA criteria and UNL's APR guidelines. Sufficient similarity was found to suggest that accreditation self-studies would provide important information regarding the progress of OA at UNL. For example, since 1997-98, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism & Mass Communications (ACEJMC) has revised its standards by specifying learning outcomes expected of all journalism programs, requiring documentation of how curriculum aligns with those stated outcomes, as well as evidence that students are accomplishing those outcomes. Another example is the recent revision of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) standards that has increased focus on OA in ways that parallel HLC/NCA's criteria and expectations. Similar examples can be found in the professional accreditation processes for other fields within UNL.

Mid-Cycle Assessment Review In 1997, the University-Wide Assessment Committee realized that depending on the expertise and interest of external teams to assist programs in the development of their process was not sufficient. Therefore, the committee created a new process called the Mid-Cycle Assessment Review (MCR). The review was called a mid-cycle because it occurred at the midpoint of a department's accreditation and/or APR cycle.

In the 1998-99 academic year, the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator initiated the MCR with programs to evaluate their progress in implementing an effective assessment process and to provide suggestions as to how to improve the process. Directions that guided review and suggestions were based on HLC/NCA criteria, standards of

¹ A copy of this supplemental document can be found on at www.unl.edu/resources/SD-1b.

accrediting agencies in various disciplines, as well as best practices in the literature. This review was recognized nationally through presentations at HLC/NCA 2001 Annual Conference, the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) 2001 Annual Assessment Forum, and an article published in "Assessment Update" (Nov/Dec 2002).

Mid-Cycle Review (MCR) has helped to educate unit faculty to understand the purposes and processes of OA through individual contact by the Assessment Coordinator with almost every academic department at UNL. The purposes of the MCR were to:

- 1) be developmental by providing departments the opportunity to consult individually with the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator about their OA process
- 2) ensure OA is focused on at some point in the program review process
- 3) make clear that UNL has standards that should serve as goals for programs as they develop and refine their OA plans
- 4) provide the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator insights about OA process and methods that could be shared with other programs and colleges.

A sample of departments was surveyed about the contribution of the MCR. Responses indicate the MCR contributed to the development of OA by:

- Clarifying purpose and expectations
- Encouraging the use of existing evidence
- Emphasizing OA is the purview of all faculty
- Suggesting methods for collecting evidence
- Determining how to make the process manageable
- Indicating process should be flexible and evolving
- Sharing measurement basics for reliable, relevant, and valid evidence.

The MCR was useful for providing a baseline understanding about OA across the institution. A weakness in this approach, however, was that the review was not intentionally structured to foster dialogue among colleagues. In colleges where a college committee exists for reviewing and providing feedback on assessment results this dialogue was more likely to occur. By spring 2003, a MCR had occurred with almost every major academic department at UNL. The MCR review had served its educational purpose in moving units forward in their attention to OA.

Institutional Reporting Process

In the fall of 1997, UNL initiated an annual reporting process for colleges, departments, and programs to communicate their OA progress. In the fall, Deans of all nine academic colleges and the Dean of Libraries are asked to report on the previous year's OA activities. These reports detail outcomes for student learning, assessment activities conducted, summary of results, interpretation of results, and actions proposed or to be taken.

Also initiated in 1997 was an annual institutional report written to benchmark and document changes that have occurred with OA over time across the institution. These assessment reports can be found at www.unl.edu/resources/sd-1c .

As OA evolved the institutional reporting process evolved as well. Starting in fall 2002, the reporting process was changed so that colleges would report every other year instead of annually. The idea was this longer cycle would give colleges, departments, and programs the opportunity to focus more on assessment activities being conducted rather than on reporting those activities, encourage a more in-depth assessment of student learning at the program level, and allow for a focus on broader student learning issues that cross program boundaries. In addition, the institutional report that originally was an annual report changed to every two years when the college reporting cycle changed.

Graduate College activities

To assist departments in evaluating their graduate program the Office of Graduate Studies has conducted surveys of graduate students. In the fall of 2002 a needs assessment was distributed to graduate students to learn more about their career goals and the academic and professional development activities that would best help them prepare for their future academic careers. Following that a survey was administered to assess the nature and quality of graduate student mentorship and development. [See www.unl.edu/resources/SD-1d.]

The Office of Graduate Studies has also collected information for each department offering graduate programs at UNL. Each departmental report includes information on:

- Issue addressed (i.e., assessment question asked)
- Assessment methods used
- Assessment results
- Department/unit conclusion or action
- Future assessment plans

Current activities to enhance Outcomes Assessment

In addition to the processes described above UNL is now undertaking additional activities to move Outcomes Assessment to the next level.

Program Excellence through Assessment, Research, and Learning (PEARL) project

Two of UNL's academic colleges with the support of the senior vice chancellor for academic affairs and the Office of Undergraduate Studies are collaborating on implementing an on-line system for facilitating and supporting academic program efforts specifically designed for the assessment of student learning outcomes. This system originated at Colorado State University (CSU) and UNL has entered into a partnership with CSU to pilot the system. This pilot involving the Colleges of Education and Human Sciences and Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources started in 2005-06 and will

continue in the 2006-07 academic year. This system provides much more than a management tool for the assessment process. It also offers a potentially more efficient and effective mechanism for campus-wide coordination of and discussion about OA by:

- Providing consistent formatting across academic programs so using OA for planning at all levels is facilitated.
- Assisting programs in coordinating documentation needed for multiple reporting requirements including biennial college assessment report, institutional regional accreditation, professional accreditation, and Academic Program Review.
- Increasing access and sharing among faculty and academic programs of unit plans, best practices, and methods/instruments.
- Raising the visibility of OA activities and results both internally and externally.

There has been abundant interest in this system across the campus and because of that interest two additional colleges, Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts and the College of Journalism and Mass Communications, will join the pilot in 2006-07. The early feedback from faculty involved in the pilot has been encouraging. The system is providing prompt, high quality feedback to programs about their assessment process, encouraging conversations about OA among and across academic departments, and assisting faculty members in better understanding the purposes and values of OA. At this point the primary benefit of the system is that it provides a flexible tool that assists faculty in planning, assessing, and modifying their programs of study while maintaining an open accountability of the entire process. The potential long-term benefits for the campus as a whole are exciting and ones we are committed to pursue over the next several years.

College Assessment Committees

Four of UNL's colleges have faculty committees overseeing OA efforts in their colleges. These four are the Colleges of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, Arts and Sciences, Business Administration, Journalism and Mass Communications, and Education and Human Sciences. In these colleges, faculty committees review OA plans and activities of individual units and provide feedback to those units about their process. In a fifth college, the faculty committee identifies and implements assessment activities that will contribute to the college as a whole. These committees have created an effective accountability mechanism for engaging in the process and also provided guidance and support.

College Learning Assessment (2005-06 through 2008-09)

UNL is one of several post-secondary institutions selected to participate in the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) Cross-Sectional One-Year Survey administered by the

Council for Aid to Education during 2005-06. Fifty-one entering first-year students were assessed in the fall 2005 on their critical thinking, analytical reasoning and writing abilities. UNL recruited its sample of students from the Chancellor's Leadership Class, Pepsi Scholars, Learning Communities, and first-year core courses in the College of Business Administration and the College of Engineering and Technology. In March 2006 UNL received a CLA Interim Institution Report from the Council for Aid to Education. In spring 2006 100 UNL seniors completed a similar assessment to establish a basis of comparison. UNL recruited these students from the history, English, business, and engineering programs. UNL will receive a CLA Annual Institutional Report from the Council after the spring testing. Additionally, the College of Business Administration tested all of its seniors graduating in May as part of required senior courses; the results will be tallied in a separate report. For the purpose of the CLA study UNL has been classified as one of eight "national" universities for comparison purposes.

Project LEAP (2005-06)

UNL is one of the Campus Action Network partners in AAC&U's Liberal Education & America's Promise (LEAP). LEAP brings together campuses committed to liberal education, helps them to improve their efforts to ensure all students achieve key liberal education outcomes, and shines a spotlight on campus practices that work.

The campus-action component of AAC&U's LEAP initiative builds the capacity of campus partners to:

1. Communicate effectively about the value of a liberal education in the 21st century with both on-campus and off-campus constituents
2. Understand better how successfully they are delivering on the promise of liberal education
3. Assess and improve efforts to ensure that all their students are achieving the key outcomes of an engaged and practical liberal education.
4. Learn from colleagues at other institutions about promising practices that work.
5. Gather data about key liberal education student learning outcomes
6. Effectively tell stories of student success as a result of liberal education

As a part of the project, UNL will conduct focus groups with students to gather information about students' understanding of and attitudes toward liberal education and key college outcomes. The results of these discussions will significantly contribute to the discussions about review and reform of UNL's general education program.

Resources for the support of work toward OA

Institutional Website for OA

The institutional website for OA [www.unl.edu/resources/SD-1e] provides access to all Institutional Assessment reports and Institutional Reports on NSSE. Covered in these

reports is a discussion of OA issues and practices at UNL. The website also provides potential models for OA from departments and programs at UNL. Most recently, an OA guidebook developed for the PEARL project was put on the website to make it available to all academic units across the institution. The guidebook provides guidelines and resources for each step of the assessment process.

Survey Bank & Audit

A bank of survey materials used at UNL is available to those units interested in developing survey instruments. This bank was created in 1998-99 to not only create the bank of surveys but also to audit for redundancies, gaps, or areas of coordination.

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

In Spring 2002 and Spring 2004, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies funded the participation, coordination, and summary of results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The Dean will continue to fund this survey every three years so the institution can re-administer the survey with first-year respondents as seniors.

In 2004, UNL sampled a substantially larger number of first-year and senior students (over 3000) because the survey was administered on the web instead of on paper and because an over sampling of students from each college would enable results to be analyzed at the college as well as institutional level. All students of color also received the survey to increase the number of responses received from them.

In fall 2004, each college received a notebook summarizing results from 2004 NSSE for their college in comparison to the institutional results. In spring 2005, each college received a report that compared their college's score to the institutional score on each of the five benchmarks of educational practice as it compared to the benchmark score for the institution.

UNL results in this survey can be found at www.unl.edu/resources/SD-1f.

Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)

Because the faculty voice is important to any discussion about student engagement, UNL also elected to participate in the inaugural version of the 2004 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) to gain a faculty perspective on student engagement. Because only 500 faculty were surveyed the results could only be analyzed at the institutional level but the results were insightful as UNL embarked on a review and reform of its general education program to determine the extent to which faculty and students agree about the emphasis of general education skills in the classroom

Graduate Student Exit Survey

The associate dean of Graduate Studies has collected, summarized, and distributed survey data from graduate students to graduate programs. These data come from exit surveys completed by students as they prepare to graduate with a masters or doctoral degree. This survey asks graduate students about the opportunities they had as a graduate student, satisfaction with their experience, and quality of their experiences. The responses were provided to departments so that results could be used for program improvement.

Omnibus Survey

The Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs commissions the Bureau of Sociological Research to conduct an annual omnibus telephone survey of UNL students. Questions are posed on a wide variety of topics, including health and social issues as well as perceptions of academic life. Sections of this survey parallel the NSSE but the Omnibus survey tends to focus more on out of class experiences while the NSSE has sections focused on in-class experiences and academic learning gains. This survey is made available to all Student Affairs units.

Career Planning and Placement Post-Graduate survey

The Office of Career Planning and Placement obtains information about the post-graduate plans of seniors registered with the office. This information covers career intentions, employment rates, geographic spread, and employer recruitment activity. A report of survey responses from graduates is shared with the colleges.

College-Wide Surveys

Colleges have also supported their departments by administering surveys to seniors, faculty, alumni, and employers. For example:

- College of Engineering enlisted the Gallup organization to develop a survey for its seniors and alumni about their learning experiences and gains.
- College of Arts and Sciences conducted an advising study across the college and in 1999 conducted parallel surveys of graduate students, graduate student alumni, and graduate faculty and then shared those data with individual graduate programs
- College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources conducts alumni and employer surveys about core learning outcomes for the college and then provides departments the opportunity to add their own set of survey questions for their alumni.
- College of Education and Human Sciences conducts surveys of teaching candidates and supervisors for the teacher education program as well as follow-up surveys of its teacher education graduates and the principals of the schools in which they are working.

Local Teaching Grants

The Initiative of Teaching & Learning Excellence grants provide one-time funds up to a maximum of \$25,000 for a variety of proposals including the developments in the assessment of student learning.