

**UNIVERSITY-WIDE ASSESSMENT**

**2000 ANNUAL REPORT**

University of Nebraska – Lincoln

February, 2002

### **University-wide Assessment Steering Committee 2000-2001**

Michael Anderson, Teaching and Learning Center

John Ballard, College of Engineering and Technology

Robert Bergstrom, Comprehensive Education Program Assessment Coordinator

Thomas C. Calhoun, Interim Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

T. Newell Decker, Office of Graduate Studies

Robert Fought, College of Fine and Performing Arts

Fayrene Hamouz, College of Human Resources and Family Sciences

Earl Hawkey, Office of Student Affairs

Jessica Jonson, University-wide Assessment Coordinator

Sharon Kuska, College of Architecture

George Pfeiffer, University Curriculum Committee

Glenda Pierce, College of Law

Linda Shipley, College of Journalism and Mass Communications

Mike Steinman, College of Arts and Sciences

Rosalee Swartz, College of Agricultural Sciences & Natural Resources

William Walstad, College of Business Administration

L. James Walter, Teachers College

The UNL Assessment Plan (1996) indicates that University-wide Assessment Steering Committee, in conjunction with the University-wide Assessment Coordinator, is to prepare an annual report providing an overview of student academic achievement during the academic year (pp. 27-28).

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **Introduction**

- I. Outcomes Assessment Activities: Effecting Change**
  - A. APR's and Accreditation**
  - B. Continual Use of Assessment Evidence by Individual Units**
  - C. Assessment of Comprehensive Education Program**
  
- II. Supporting Continued Progress**
  - A. Contribution of Mid-Cycle Review**
  - B. Sharing Purpose and Ideas**
  - C. Peer Review of Teaching Project**
  
- III. Collaboration at Institutional Level**
  - A. Freshman Experience Taskforce and Learning Communities**
  - B. Electronic Portfolios: Student Involvement**

### **Conclusion**

### **Appendices**

- Appendix A: Progress Indicator Charts – Assessment Of Undergraduate Majors**
- Appendix B: Progress Indicator Charts – Assessment of Graduate Programs**
- Appendix C: Teaching and Learning Center – Assessment Models Workshop Flyer**

## INTRODUCTION

In the Fall 1999, representatives from North Central Association (NCA) conducted a focus visit on UNL's progress in its assessment of student learning outcomes. Following that visit, the NCA formally notified UNL that the institution has been reaccredited through 2006-07. The team's conclusions resulted in three recommendations on which UNL is to submit a written progress report in December 2002. Those three recommendations are quoted as follows:

*“The team believes that the campus-level officers, who are in responsible charge of assessment, have a framework for implementation in place for measuring student academic achievement. However, the implementation of assessment of student academic achievement is not adequate in the following areas:*

- 1. The Student Affairs Office has not been appropriately included in the planning and conduct of assessment at UNL.*
- 2. It appears that some academic areas are far behind where they should be in implementing a program of assessment. UNL has made progress in implementation of its assessment of student academic achievement throughout the institution, yet the implementation of assessment at the college level is below a standard of acceptability in some units.*
- 3. Systematically, there has not been a broad use of the results of assessment to effect change in UNL programs to enhance student learning. (p.27-28 – NCA Team Report)*

The intent of this report is to address the specific concerns of the NCA in the process of continuing the original purpose of the report. That purpose being the summarization of results and conclusions of outcomes assessment activities conducted by individual units and overseen by the University-Wide Assessment Committee. The summary is then used to serve as a focus for determining the future direction of outcomes assessment at UNL.

Although the purpose of the report is continued, the format has changed. The 2000 report has three sections. The first (Outcome Assessment Activities: Effecting Change) discusses the extent to which processes and activities that directly contribute to collecting and using evidence of student learning for programmatic improvement have effected change.

The second (Supporting Continued Progress) discuss support for continuing discourse about the purpose of outcomes assessment by associating that purpose with the improvement of our instructional programs. The innovation of one of UNL's support mechanisms, the Mid-Cycle Assessment Review, garnered recognition through the acceptance of conference proposals discuss the Mid-Cycle Review at the North Central Association 2001 Annual Conference and the 2001 AAHE Annual Assessment Conference.

The third (Collaboration) discusses collaborative activities at the institutional level one of which led to UNL being chosen for the AAC&U Greater Expectations Initiative.

Because a portion of the report is based on information from annual assessment reports from UNL's academic colleges, it is necessary to clarify the currency of that information. Request for annual reports occur in the late fall for information on activities that occurred the previous academic year. So for this report information in Section I Paragraph B (Use of

University-Wide 2000 Annual Assessment Report  
February 2002

Assessment Evidence by Individual Units reflects assessment activities conducted in 1999-2000.  
The remainder of the report is based on information from 2000-2001.

## *I. Outcomes Assessment Activities: Effecting Change*

The extent to which outcomes assessment activities are effecting change are discussed in this first section of the report. Identifying how efforts to assess student learning are contributing to our understanding, discussions, and decisions about our educational programs is necessary for engaging the UNL community in a continually evolving discussion of how outcomes assessment can make a meaningful contribution. The information in this section also reflects the progress the institution is making regarding the NCA's recommendation for a broad use of assessment results to effect change in UNL's programs.

### *A. APR's and Accreditation*

Academic Program Reviews (APR) and Accreditations are intended to insure the quality of academic programming, both instructional and non-instructional.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, UNL and respective accrediting agencies have integrated outcomes assessment into these program planning and budgeting processes.<sup>2</sup> Reviewing these documents provides some evidence of the extent to which the outcomes assessment process and evidence of student learning have been integrated into program reflection and consequently, planning.

In 2000-01, five Academic Program Reviews and two Accreditations were conducted. A reading of available documents<sup>3</sup> from these reviews revealed that most programs are integrating a discussion of their assessment process and assessment evidence into the teaching or curricular portions of their self-study document. Other conclusions from this reading include:

- In contrast to previous years, most of the self-study reports went beyond just providing assessment results to making general conclusions based on the results. In two reports, there was a thorough examination of outcome assessment results from multiple methods and the use of those results when making conclusions about the effectiveness and future of the program.
- Perceptions from students and alumni about their learning gains had a greater influence in informing curricular change as reported in self-study reports. However, information from the college's annual reports suggest that student work is having as much of an influence as student perceptions in program improvement (See next section: "Use of Assessment Evidence by Individual Units").
- Feedback from review team's on department's/program's outcomes assessment processes, evidence, or conclusions is scarce. However, in one instance a department

---

1 *Academic Program Review Guidelines*, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Fall 1996, p. 1

2 *1998 University-Wide Annual Assessment Report*, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, July 1999, p. 4. Provides a brief overview of Academic Program Review process and the integration of assessment into that process.

3 Available documentation included self-study reports for all reviews with only a portion of the review's having review team reports completed.

fully integrated the evidence of student learning into their self-study and thoroughly used the results in the summary of its program strengths and areas for improvement.

## Summary

It is positive that programs understand that reflection on instructional programs in self-studies require more than just what faculty believes is occurring. In 2000-01, there were two solid examples of how evidence of student learning can contribute to program planning. However, in some cases, programs have not gone far enough in using a variety of evidence that speak directly of student learning in the program to inform improvement. This could be occurring for two reasons:

- 1) Assessment efforts need to evolve and mature further before those efforts can make a significant contribution to program planning where accountability as well as improvement plays a role.
- 2) There may be a need to identify more concisely, how outcome assessment should be incorporated into the APR and the real contribution evidence of student learning can make to that process.

A solution could be the mid-cycle assessment review (MCR). The content of APR review team reports indicate that feedback is not going to come from that audience at least in regard to the assessment process itself. Whereas, the MCR serves as a formative mechanism for improving the assessment process of a program and the meaningful information that process provides. The self-study of one department that fully integrated outcomes assessment into their program planning was one of the first units to participate in the MCR. The success of that unit probably cannot be entirely attributed to the MCR but it does suggest the effect of the MCR should continue to be monitored to see if it related to similar successes in other APR/Accreditation self-studies.

## B. Continual Use of Assessment Evidence by Individual Units

Although APR's and Accreditation's are culminating point for reflection on student learning, colleges/departments/programs are continually reflecting on and using assessment evidence. The University-wide Assessment Steering Committee developed an on-going process for the colleges to communicate their assessment activities. This annual reporting process began in fall 1997. Guidelines for the report are for content and not format. In short, colleges and their departments/programs are asked to share what they have learned from assessment evidence they have collected.

These annual reports indicate that assessment evidence is used for a variety of purposes. For everything from improving the assessment plan itself to following up on the effectiveness of program change. To document these contributions and illustrate how assessment activities are regularly effecting change in educational programs a summary is provided in Appendix A and B.

4 This summary takes the form of a series of charts representing progress in the implementation and use of the outcomes assessment process.

### *Summary*

These graphs suggest considerable progress in the level of activity and the contribution of that activity in outcomes assessment across the institution. It is possible that assessment evidence is having a broader impact than what is represented in the charts because it is based on what is reported and does not necessarily represent the varied ways that evidence of student learning contributes to discussions and improvements of our educational programs.

### *C. Assessment of Comprehensive Education Program*

In 2000-01, the Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, appointed a faculty committee to explore the effectiveness of the Essential Studies requirement of the Comprehensive Education Program under which undergraduates must take at least one course dealing directly with race, ethnicity, and gender (Area H<sup>4</sup>). The committee was asked to sketch out an assessment plan that would measure the learning outcomes of the requirement. However, the committee found this goal difficult to accomplish because the goals for the requirement are not broad enough to apply to disciplines throughout the university and defined enough to guide course selection and planning. Therefore, the committee recommended assembling study groups of Area H teachers in each college to discuss what actually happens in their classrooms, to share syllabi and teaching methods, to find common learning goals, and to suggest ways in which the college could enhance the faculty's work and the Area H objectives. Representatives of each college panel could then be drawn together to draft and propose university-wide learning objectives for Area H courses.

## ***II. Supporting Continued Progress***

### *A. Contribution Of Mid-Cycle Review*

The mid-cycle review was established to assist units in better understanding the assessment process and the methods by which they can effectively collect evidence of student learning that will contribute to meaningful discussions about program improvement. It also facilitates collaboration between administration and faculty in a formative rather than summative sense to determine how well the unit's assessment process is assisting them in their decision making about their educational programs.

To determine if the mid-cycle review was accomplishing its goal in fostering faculty understanding of outcomes assessment, individual faculty in each of the eleven departments who participated in the review between Fall 1998 and the Spring 2001. Six of those eleven

---

<sup>4</sup> The college's annual reports reflect activities conducted in the 1999-2000 academic year.

departments responded and five of those six responses were generally positive about the review. There are seven themes suggesting the contribution the review made to faculty's understanding and use of the assessment process. They are:

- Clarifying purpose and expectations of outcomes assessment
- Encouraging the use of existing evidence for assessing outcomes
- Communicating that outcomes assessment is the purview of all faculty
- Suggesting methods for collecting evidence about issues of interest
- Determining how to make the outcomes assessment process manageable
- Emphasizing the importance of flexibility by allowing an assessment plan to evolve.
- Sharing measurement basics so evidence collected is reliable, relevant, and valid.

In addition, the evaluation also provided insight as to how the mid-cycle review has benefited the institution as a whole.

- Greater communication and understanding of the purpose of the outcomes assessment process emphasizing that it is about improvement rather than accountability
- More positive perception of the outcomes assessment process with faculty because they begin to understand that the process is to pursue what they value about student learning in their educational programs
- More meaningful assessment activities are being conducted because the review is providing departments with individualized consultation
- Providing the opportunity for units to learn from experience of others because the coordinator has a forum to become aware of the units' issues/needs and an awareness of how other units have addressed those same issues and needs.

The evaluation also raised some shortcomings of the process:

- Continuing enthusiasm/momentum created by the review
- Reaching faculty at large because the message may not be shared beyond faculty who participated in the review
- Giving prompt attention because only so many mid-cycle reviews can be conducted within any one year

In response to these results the University-Wide Assessment Committee suggested that the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator ask departmental chairs to participate in the review rather than make it voluntary so the first two shortcomings might be addressed. A solution to the third shortcoming is difficult because what makes the review work so well, individualized consultation, creates a situation where it is only possible to deal with so many units in any one year. One solution was to shorten the report to the unit so that it becomes a memorandum of minutes from the meeting. This change is also conducive to the goal of the review because it again emphasizes that the mid-cycle review is a process of collaboration where units can explore how the process will work best for them.

In 2000-01 reviews were conducted with two colleges (three units each) and two units. These discussions led to many of the benefits mentioned above in the evaluation results. In addition, proposals for conference presentations about the review process were accepted at the 2001 North Central Association's Annual Conference and 2001 AAHE Assessment Conference and received very positive reviews from the audience in both venues.

### *B. Sharing Purpose and Ideas*

Recognizing that successful communication about outcomes assessment is dependent on how it is framed and encouraged, the University-Wide Assessment Committee decided on some specific activities to improve communication in addition to the communication that occurs in the Mid-cycle review. The committee considered these additional activities because it will be several years before mid-cycle reviews is conducted with all departments at UNL. The two suggestions included:

- Brief overview of the purpose, expectations, and benefits of the outcomes assessment process to Dean's
- Invite departments who have successfully used assessment evidence to improve their educational programs to discuss this success at a Teaching and Learning Center workshop.

Both of these suggestions were carried out in the 2000-01 academic year. In October 2000, the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator gave a presentation at a Dean's Retreat that discussed the status of outcomes assessment at UNL and a vision for the future. Specifically, this is a vision that encourages the use of outcomes assessment evidence by a unit for their own improvement. A vision that goes beyond engaging in assessment just for the purpose of satisfying accreditation mandate but to provide a mechanism for our institution to improve its educational programs.<sup>5</sup> The dean's response to the presentation was very positive and led to several requests for the University-Wide Assessment coordinator to give the presentation to leadership in their own colleges.

The second suggestion was implemented in February 2001 where the Teaching and Learning Center and the Office of Academic Affairs co-sponsored a program titled "Program Assessment Made Meaningful: Selected Models of Success at UNL". The program highlighted a variety of assessment strategies (e.g. capstone course, standardized tests, program portfolios, and surveys) and provided recognition for units as well as productive discussion about the role of outcomes assessment. A flyer listing the units who participated in the workshop can be found in Appendix C.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Dean's presentation can be found on the web at <http://www.unl.edu/svcaa/priorities/assessment/outcomes/sld001.htm>

### *C. Peer Review of Teaching and Assessment Project*

The Peer Review project has continued to indirectly supported outcomes assessment at the department level. In 2000-01, four departmental teams were involved in the exploration of teaching and learning both individually and at the program level. Four themes emerged from participant evaluations:

- Discussions contributed to faculty thinking about their teaching in terms of what they want their students to learn and whether they are learning it.
- Team participation contributed to better conversations about learning across the curriculum.
- Insights regarding the assessment of student learning and conversations about curriculum among teams were valued the most.
- Participants concluded that documentation of teaching is useful in improving the curriculum.

## **III. Collaboration**

### *A. Freshman Experience Task Force and Learning Communities*

The Freshman Experience Taskforce was designed to build a partnership of individuals from student affairs and academic affairs who were instrumental in developing learning communities, charter seminars, and enhancing first-year student orientations. These activities in part contributed to the selection of UNL by the AAC&U as one of 16 institutions for its Greater Expectations Initiative involving membership in a Consortium on Quality Education.

The Freshman Experience Task Force initiated and implemented plans for assessing learning communities in 2000-2001. The plan involved surveying three groups of entering freshman: 1) students enrolled in learning communities, 2) student enrolled in the honors program, and 3) a control group (student not enrolled in either). The three groups were surveyed as they entered college regarding their expectations (College Student Expectations Questionnaire - CSXQ) and later followed up on those expectations with a survey about their experiences (College Student Experiences Questionnaire - CSEQ). Both surveys were administered but an oversight with the CSEQ made it impossible to determine which respondents were in each of the three groups (learning communities, honors students, and control). The CSEQ will be readministered to the three groups in Spring 2002.

### *B. Collaboration with Student Involvement*

Collaboration between the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator and the Office of Student Involvement occurred in the 2000-01 academic year that involved the development of a mechanism for students to create an electronic portfolio. The portfolio would allow students to document and reflect on their record of academic and co-curricular goals beginning with their

first year at UNL. The portfolio is intended to benefit students by providing them a way to organize and document their accomplishments and highlight their skills and experience to advisors, faculty, staff, and employers. The portfolio can also potentially provide documentation of student competencies for accreditation and outcomes assessment. Given this potential, the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator joined the developmental group to advise on issues related to outcomes assessment and acquire information that could be shared with related audiences not familiar with the project. Next year the project will be piloted with several groups of students including students in two colleges, various courses throughout the institution and students in several first year programs (e.g. Foundations, Learning Communities, etc.).

## **CONCLUSION**

The report provides evidence that outcomes assessment evidence is progressively contributing to decisions about our educational programs and enhancing formal program reviews. Continual progress is needed and will occur as long as UNL strives for new understandings about the outcomes assessment process in terms of what it is and can be about. The progress involves continuing to integrate into conversations about the learning goals of our educational programs and experiences and following up on the effectiveness of those programs and experience to determine if they assisted students in achieving those goals. This integration can satisfy our need as an institution to collect evidence that meaningfully contributes to our educational decisions and the improvement