The SUNY Assessment Initiative:
initial campus and system perspectives

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ABSTRACT   *The State University of New York (SUNY) is in the process of implementing a remarkably ambitious and collegial system-wide assessment of general education and academic majors across its 64 campuses. The SUNY Assessment Initiative is founded upon a balanced view of assessment as both accountability and improvement as well as the utilization of best assessment practices. Another fundamental component is the critical role of faculty governance in the assessment of student learning outcomes, at the campus and system levels. This paper explains the rationale underlying the SUNY Assessment Initiative, describes specific procedures and processes involved in its implementation, and provides a preliminary report on its status.*

Introduction

The State University of New York (SUNY) is the largest comprehensive system of public higher education in the USA, comprising 64 individual institutions geographically dispersed across New York State's 62 counties and categorized into four institution types: doctoral degree-granting institutions, comprehensive colleges, colleges of technology and community colleges. Approximately 382,000 students are currently enrolled across SUNY, pursuing educational options ranging from short-term vocational/technical courses and certificates, associate and baccalaureate degrees, graduate programs and post-doctoral studies, offered through traditional classroom as well as on-line instruction. While this great diversity in institutional types, programs and modes of course delivery is highly beneficial to SUNY students and the citizens of New York, it poses a real challenge from an assessment perspective. This paper describes the SUNY Assessment Initiative, an ambitious attempt to develop a process for assessing student learning outcomes across the university and meet that challenge.

Ewell (2002) recently concluded that, almost 20 years after the emergence of outcomes assessment in higher education, two changes are necessary to transform it from a movement into a culture. First, an effective assessment plan requires that all members of a college community assume shared responsibility for fostering student achievement. Second, academic administration must embrace the principles of a true learning environment. The SUNY Assessment Initiative embodies both of these principles, necessarily linking successful assessment to close collaboration among administrators, faculty and staff as well as to supportive administrative processes and structures. Perhaps most important, this initiative aims to balance individual campus autonomy with the need for accountability at the campus and system levels, at the same time reflecting best assessment practices.

Assessment and the SUNY System

Student learning outcomes assessment has a long history in the SUNY system, and at one time SUNY was positioned to become a national leader in the assessment movement (Burke, 1992). By the mid-1990s, however, university-wide interest in and commitment to assessment had waned, likely due to recurring fiscal crises and changes in academic leadership. Notably, a number of individuals, programs and campuses continued to distinguish themselves in this arena, which proved especially useful once SUNY System Administration acted to re-establish assessment as a priority. In fall 1999, University Provost Peter D. Salins formed the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes and charged it to develop recommendations that would guide a comprehensive university-wide assessment effort that would return SUNY to a position of prominence in the outcomes assessment movement.

Setting the Stage

While the Provost's Advisory Task Force felt that SUNY faced a daunting task in attempting to reassert itself as a leader in outcomes assessment, there were reasons to believe this goal was achievable. First, those SUNY institutions that had actively pursued an assessment agenda were in a position to provide examples and expertise to their colleague institutions. For example, SUNY Fredonia had been refining its approach to general education assessment for more than a decade, receiving national recognition for these efforts (Amiran *et al.*, 1993); SUNY Cortland led a consortium of SUNY institutions—including Empire State College, Tompkins Cortland Community College and the Fashion Institute of Technology—as they participated in one of two benchmarking projects organized by the American Productivity and Quality Center on measuring institutional performance measures and assessing learning outcomes (Assessing Learning Outcomes, 1998; Measuring Institutional Performance, 1997); and Nassau Community College has received wide recognition for its high quality assessment initiatives.

A second reason for optimism was the fact that in 1999 the Provost's Advisory Task Force on General Education had developed a clear set of learning outcomes for general education programs at SUNY's undergraduate degree-granting institutions. These outcomes, summarized below in Table 1, were invaluable in that they established a uniform set of learning objectives all campuses were expected to meet as part of their general education curricula. Further, SUNY System Administration had initiated a follow-up general education review process in which campuses had each of their general education courses approved as meeting one or more of the student learning outcomes in the twelve

discipline and competency areas. This process produced a finite set of courses on each campus that would be appropriate for inclusion in the assessment of the general education learning outcomes across the university.

Finally, it was thought that the likelihood of successfully implementing an effective assessment program across SUNY would be enhanced by the university's long history of working cooperatively with university-wide governance bodies on assessment efforts (e.g., *Assessment at SUNY*, 1992). In fact, the presidents and other members of the University Faculty Senate and the Faculty Council of Community Colleges served as members of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. Given the emphasis in the literature on the importance of involving governance organizations in the assessment process (Morse & Santiago, 2000), this collaboration between System Administration and these governing bodies seemed to bode well for the SUNY Assessment Initiative.

Lessons Learned from Other States and University Systems

Despite the proliferation of available resources on the implementation of effective assessment programs in higher education, there was surprisingly little information from a state- or university-wide perspective to guide the SUNY initiative, at least information reflecting the basic assumptions and principles the university sought to include in its approach. For instance, as illustrated in an article by Wellman (2001), statewide accountability systems for higher education typically rely heavily on institutional measures such as persistence and graduation rates, with many states, such as California, making no specific reference to measures of student learning achievement or even goals for student learning. Tennessee includes 'quality and performance' goals in its performance funding model, with measures including ACT test scores, pass rates on licensure examinations, and accreditation recognition for accreditable programs.

A recent article by Ewell (2001) summarizes the attempts of states to make standardized tests an element of their higher education policy, concluding that, in most cases, these efforts do not yield information leading to program improvement but instead serve to ensure quality control, provide a way of 'keeping score', or publicly embarrass institutions. Of course, the principal flaw from an assessment perspective in the approaches described by Ewell and by Wellman (2001) is the fact that the measures are totally disconnected from specific objectives for student learning, a strategy considered unacceptable by our Task Force. As such, the group concluded early on that the SUNY Assessment Initiative would necessarily follow a new path, one untested by other states and university systems.

The SUNY Assessment Initiative: fundamental assumptions and principles

In preparing its final report and recommendations, the Task Force thought it critical to provide a conceptual framework for outcomes assessment to guide subsequent efforts across the university. This framework was based in part on the work that had taken place in the higher education assessment movement, and the Task Force borrowed heavily from the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), endorsing unequivocally the 9 Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning (www.aahe.org/principl.htm) offered by AAHE's Assessment Forum. In addition, it was important to the Task Force to identify principles and assumptions that were unique to the SUNY context.

TABLE 1. SUNY general education learning outcomes

Mathematics
Students will show competence in the following quantitative reasoning skills:

- arithmetic;
- algebra;
- geometry;
- data analysis;
- quantitative reasoning.

Natural sciences
Students will demonstrate:
- understanding of the methods scientists use to explore natural phenomena, including observation, hypothesis development, measurement and data collection, experimentation, evaluation of evidence, and employment of mathematical analysis; and
- application of scientific data, concepts, and models in one of the natural sciences.

Social sciences
Students will demonstrate:
- understanding of the methods social scientists use to explore social phenomena, including observation, hypothesis development, measurement and data collection, experimentation, evaluation of evidence, and employment of mathematical and interpretive analysis; and
- knowledge of major concepts, models and issues of at least one discipline in the social sciences.

American history
Students will demonstrate:
- knowledge of a basic narrative of American history: political, economic, social, and cultural, including knowledge of unity and diversity in American society;
- knowledge of common institutions in American society and how they have affected different groups; and
- understanding of America's evolving relationship with the rest of the world.

Western civilization
Students will:
- demonstrate knowledge of the development of the distinctive features of the history, institutions, economy, society, culture, etc., of Western civilization; and
- Relate the development of Western civilization to that of other regions of the world.

Other world civilizations
Students will demonstrate:
- knowledge of either a broad outline of world history, or
- the distinctive features of the history, institutions, economy, society, culture, etc., of one non-Western civilization.

Humanities
Students will demonstrate:
- knowledge of the conventions and methods of at least one of the humanities in addition to those encompassed by other knowledge areas required by the General Education program.

The Arts
Students will demonstrate:
- understanding of at least one principal form of artistic expression and the creative process inherent therein.

Foreign language
Students will demonstrate:
- basic proficiency in the understanding and use of a foreign language; and
- knowledge of the distinctive features of culture(s) associated with the language they are studying.

Basic communication
Students will:
- produce coherent texts within common college-level written forms;
- demonstrate the ability to revise and improve such texts;
- research a topic, develop an argument, and organize supporting details;
- develop proficiency in oral discourse; and
- evaluate an oral presentation according to established criteria.

Critical thinking (reasoning)
Students will:
- identify, analyse, and evaluate arguments as they occur in their own or others' work; and
- develop well-reasoned arguments.

Information management
Students will:
- perform the basic operations of personal computer use;
- understand and use basic research techniques; and
- locate, evaluate and synthesize information from a variety of sources.

Assessment as Improvement and Accountability

Throughout its deliberations, the Task Force was concerned with the extent to which the SUNY Assessment Initiative should reflect assessment's dual functions of improvement and accountability. Agreeing with Ewell's (1997) assertion that the relationship between these two functions is 'rich and strange', the Task Force wrestled with this issue far more than any other. Eventually, the group agreed that both assessment as improvement and assessment as accountability had an appropriate place in the SUNY Assessment Initiative, placing foremost emphasis on the former as a means of transforming teaching and learning. After all, as noted by Palomba and Banta (1999), there is ample evidence that institutions can make such transformations in this way, perhaps most notably Truman State University, which became Missouri's 'selective, statewide public liberal arts and sciences university' through a commitment to outcomes assessment (Magruder *et al*., 1997). Further, while 'the possibility of proving a cause-and-effect relationship between assessment and improved learning is likely to remain elusive' (Hutchings & Marchese, 1990, p. 35), positive institutional changes of other kinds can be directly attributed to assessment activity.

While more comfortable with assessment as a means for helping to improve teaching and learning, the Task Force fully acknowledged the need for publicly-funded institutions to be accountable, and it specifically recognized that SUNY has a responsibility to demonstrate to its various stakeholders that it is fulfilling the educational goals for which it was created. Of course, in a multi-campus system there are multiple levels of accountability, of the university to the Board of Trustees, executive and legislative officials and the public, and of individual campuses to their local governing boards, students and their parents, employers, the communities they serve and their individual and various accrediting agencies.

Positive Benefits of Assessment for Faculty Development, Community Building and Advocacy

In order to underscore the potential that an effective assessment process has for playing a role in broader improvements on campus, the Task Force pointed to a number of other benefits. As Palomba and Banta (1999) observe:

> Much of the value of assessment comes from the systematic way it makes educators question, discuss, share, and observe. As a result, assessment contributes greatly to the understanding of what educators do and to the choices they make about future directions for their work. (pp. 328–329)

Although the point is often overlooked, the assessment of student outcomes is in the best interests of faculty, who have a great stake in knowing whether or not their teaching efforts are effective in promoting student learning. There is also growing evidence that assessment activity serves to facilitate communication among faculty (Hill, 1996; Rust, 1997), suggesting the assessment process can provide the basis for meaningful dialogue among faculty members regarding their programs and how to best bring about improvements in student learning.

It is also the case that colleges and universities with strong assessment programs are in a position to translate that asset into additional fiscal resources. A number of institutions—including Ohio University, Truman State University, and the University of Tennessee—have reported success using assessment results to make a case for increased funding from their states (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Ohio University received academic

challenge and program excellence awards from the Ohio Board of Regents based on assessment information (Williford & Moden, 1993). Using these examples, the Task Force contended that the implementation of a quality assessment initiative across SUNY would assist System Administration as it works to promote the university and secure additional funding on its behalf.

Coordinating Assessment with External Accreditation and Certification Processes

As is true nationwide, New York colleges and universities are increasingly expected to engage in outcomes assessment by external agencies to fulfill accreditation and certification requirements. According to Palomba and Banta (1999), all six accrediting bodies in the USA require collection and use of assessment data for program improvement, including the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the university's accrediting agency. In addition, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) recently issued guidelines stipulating that teacher preparation programmes must be accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education or another nationally recognized accrediting agency. In light of these circumstances, the Task Force strongly endorsed the practice of allowing campuses to engage in outcomes assessment of their academic majors as part of other, ongoing program-level accreditation and certification processes.

Respect for the Diversity of All SUNY Campuses and Their Respective Governance and Curriculum Structures and Processes

As indicated earlier, there is great diversity across SUNY's 64 campuses and a university-wide assessment program that ignores that environment would inevitably fail. A fundamental strategy for respecting differences among campuses is to provide flexible assessment guidelines that confer maximal autonomy to individual institutions, helping ensure that the campus' assessment plan is consistent with its own mission, goals, and objectives. This strategy also serves to encourage the use of course- and program-specific assessment measures, thereby increasing the likelihood that faculty members teaching in the program actively participate in the assessment process, hopefully leading to faculty buy-in.

It was also critical from the Task Force's perspective that the SUNY Assessment Initiative incorporate existing university-wide governance structures and processes and, to this point, the project has been very successful in this regard. As described earlier, the presidents and other members of the two university-wide governance organizations served as Task Force members, enabling ongoing dialogue between the Task Force and their respective constituencies, as well as an opportunity to incorporate feedback received from them into the Task Force's report. Finally, the Task Force recommended that individual campus assessment plans developed through this initiative adhere to existing governance and curriculum structures, to be demonstrated by the local campus governance leader signing off on the plan before it was submitted for university-wide review.

Need for Ongoing Communication Between Campuses and System Administration

The effective implementation and maintenance of a quality university-wide assessment program depends heavily on continuous dialogue between individual campuses and

SUNY System Administration. The Task Force recommended that such dialogue include the sharing of information regarding assessment activities and results, with campuses obligated to report results on a regular basis, and that System Administration periodically evaluate the assessment process itself, being sure to solicit and use feedback from individual campuses and to report those findings back to campuses. A paramount consideration in this process should be the extent to which the SUNY Assessment Initiative is producing information that leads to improvements in the teaching and learning process as well as in academic programs.

Need for Institutional and System Administration Commitment to and Support for Assessment

The Task Force strongly asserted that a quality assessment initiative would be difficult to implement without an infusion of new resources or the reallocation of existing resources. Clearly, individual campuses bear some responsibility in this regard since Middle States and other accrediting agencies already have specific expectations in place with respect to the demonstration of student learning, but the Task Force also felt that SUNY System Administration needed to make a commitment to providing sustained support for the SUNY Assessment Initiative, working assiduously with campuses and the Board of Trustees to ensure adequate resources for assessment at the campus level.

System Administration is also expected to show support through its willingness to commit personnel to coordinate the assessment process and its efforts to accord this initiative greater visibility through periodic reports and updates. Finally, since valid and accessible information is the basis of sound assessment practice, System Administration will need to maintain and provide databases that are reliable, coordinated, and available to appropriate persons.

It is important to note that the Task Force was not naïve regarding the likely availability of significant new state support for the university, a situation that has worsened since the tragic events of September 11. For example, a real emphasis was placed on the use of course-embedded assessment as a strategy for minimizing costs. The Task Force also suggested that the university's performance-based funding model (for state-operated/funded campuses) might eventually be revised to reflect campuses' implementation of effective assessment programs, though performance funding should not be linked to the absolute level of the results of assessment or to direct comparisons among campuses (a different approach would be required for SUNY's community colleges, which are funded differently).

Use and Reporting of Assessment Findings

Finally, the Task Force spent considerable time developing a set of explicit statements regarding the specific ways in which assessment findings from individual campuses should—and should not—be used and reported. Consistent with the notion that information yielded through assessment should be used first and foremost to improve teaching and learning, the Task Force stated that assessment results should never be used to punish, publicly compare, or embarrass students, faculty, courses, programs, departments, or institutions either individually or collectively (it is important to note that the Task Force felt that this should apply to both individual campuses and to System Administration).

Of course, the public reporting of assessment data is essential if the assessment process is to meet its accountability function. The Task Force therefore proposed a process through which individual campuses would regularly report assessment findings to System Administration on a regular basis, with System Administration responsible for ensuring that these findings are used in an appropriate manner, consistent with the Task Force's recommendations. Specifically, the Task Force recommended that when System Administration publicly disseminates assessment findings, such dissemination should take place in aggregate form, for the university as a whole or for its constituent sectors. Similarly, individual campuses should disseminate assessment data for their own programs through aggregate reporting, although the Task Force recognized the right of individual institutions and academic programs to use their own assessment data as they see fit (e.g., for recruiting or advocacy purposes), though it warned that campuses must remain collegial and should not use these data as a means of comparing themselves in ways that would tend to diminish other institutions.

The SUNY Assessment Initiative: major recommendations

In establishing a framework for a comprehensive, university-wide assessment initiative that could guide assessment activity for the foreseeable future, the Task Force felt it necessary to address both the areas of general education and academic major programs. The group also distinguished between assessment of general education that would be specific to individual campuses (i.e., campus-based assessment) and assessment of general education that would take place across campuses using common measures (i.e., university-wide assessment).

Task Force Recommendations: campus-based assessment of general education

Overall, the Task Force believed that campus-based assessment of general education would directly lead to improvements in local general education programs, instructional practices and student learning since assessment data derived from campus efforts could be fed back into the teaching and learning process relatively quickly. In addition, since these efforts necessarily required involvement of faculty teaching in the local programs, faculty buy-in to the assessment process might be enhanced. A fundamental characteristic of this campus-based approach, therefore, was flexibility and autonomy, with the intention that assessment programs be developed that were appropriate to the local general education programs themselves. The Task Force did offer the following recommendations to guide campus-based assessment of general education:

(1) *Assessment plan outcomes.* The Task Force agreed that campus-based general education plans should include the learning outcomes developed in 1999 by the Provost's Advisory Task Force on General Education in the twelve discipline and competency areas. Additional objectives unique to a particular campus could also be included.
(2) *Time frame*. Realizing that developing a comprehensive assessment plan for all twelve discipline and competency areas might pose an impossible task for some campuses, the Task Force proposed that campuses be given three years to fully implement its campus-based general education plan, assessing four areas per year.
(3) *Faculty involvement and review by curriculum and governance bodies*. A third recommendation by the Task Force was that the tasks of developing and implement-

ing campus-based assessment of general education should fall primarily to the faculty members teaching in the program, with assistance from professional staff and students as appropriate. The Task Force also recognized that on some campuses it might be necessary for governance bodies or offices that provide administrative support to the general education programs to lead the assessment effort. Along similar lines, the Task Force recommended that any campus-based general education plan be reviewed and approved by relevant campus curriculum and governance bodies.

(4) *University-wide review*. A final recommendation was made for the purpose of building in university-wide review that would help assure uniformity of standards, with the understanding that such review would take place in a collegial, supportive way. Specifically, the Task Force recommended formation of a group from across SUNY consisting largely of faculty, but also including campus chief academic officers, professional staff, students and System Administration staff. This group, to be called the General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) group, would provide initial review and approval of campuses' general education assessment plans as well as ongoing review once plan implementation began. The activities of the GEAR group to this point are described in greater detail below.

Task Force Recommendations: university-wide assessment of general education

While it was clear to the Task Force that campus-based assessment of general education would have direct and positive consequences for program improvement, the functions to be served by university-wide assessment seemed more problematic. Specifically, concerns were expressed regarding the appropriateness of using a common methodology to assess general education outcomes across many, different campuses and the Task Force spent considerable time debating the legitimacy and desirability of such a process. The major concern raised was the fear that System Administration might use results to publicly compare campuses.

Ultimately, the Task Force agreed that university-wide assessment of general education did have an appropriate place in the SUNY Assessment Initiative, largely because members realized that such a process could produce results that would the strengthen the university's institutions and the system as a whole while demonstrating its effectiveness to key constituents, including the Chancellor, the Board of Trustees, legislative and executive officials and the public, and serving assessment's accountability function and advocacy purposes. Of course, the distinction between assessment as improvement and assessment as accountability is far from absolute. Individual campuses may use data derived from their own assessment programs for accountability purposes as they see fit, such as when they report on the quality of their general education program to Middle States or to the public. Similarly, university-wide assessment might very well yield findings that feed back into teaching and learning, such as when different campuses are utilizing pedagogically distinct approaches to a particular learning outcome, with one approach seeming to be more effective over time.

It is important to note that the Task Force shared the University Provost's view that 'high-stakes' individual testing of students was neither an effective nor appropriate approach to take, because such an approach would likely provide little if any real insight into ways of improving teaching and learning and might lead, in fact, to lower standards. Instead, the SUNY Assessment Initiative has as its goal to raise standards through

feedback from assessment to improve programs and through identifying best practices that can be shared throughout the university.

In establishing parameters for university-wide assessment, the Task Force offered the following recommendations:

(1) *Assessment plan outcomes*. As with campus-based assessment of general education, the Task Force agreed that the student learning outcomes developed in 1999 by the Provost's Advisory Task Force on General Education should serve as the basis of university-wide assessment. However, the Task Force recommended that such assessment should not attempt to measure those learning outcomes in certain discipline areas that would tend to lead towards a narrowed or common curriculum across the university's many, diverse campuses. On a practical level also, of course, it would be virtually impossible to develop a common methodology. Instead, university-wide assessment of general education once implemented will focus exclusively on process-oriented, foundational learning outcomes (i.e., mathematics, the scientific method, written and oral communication, critical thinking and information management).

(2) *Time frame*. The Task Force also recommended that university-wide assessment of general education not begin until the campus-based assessment process described above is in place. In this way, campuses would have time to establish sound assessment programs of their own, using that process to work out problems and make changes where needed. The Task Force believed that this complementary approach of a university-wide assessment process in conjunction with a campus-based strategy would produce a model in SUNY unlike any other in the nation, characterized by remarkable campus and faculty autonomy, a reasonable degree of uniformity, and a high level of accountability to all stakeholders.

(3) *Instrument development*. A third recommendation related to the need for adherence to the highest psychometric standards when developing an instrument or set of measures to be administered as part of the university-wide assessment of general education. Included in these standards must be appropriate attention to the reliability and validity of the measures, as well as to the sampling procedures utilized in selecting students to participate in such an assessment.

(4) *The process*. Finally, the Task Force made recommendations regarding the process through which university-wide assessment of general education should take place, stipulating that it should be overseen by a group of faculty from across the university—including representatives from appropriate governance bodies—working collaboratively with students and System Administration staff. In particular, this group would have responsibility for developing the actual assessment instrument(s), as well as procedures to be followed in administering the assessment. The Task Force also recognized the possibility that this group would need to work with external consultants with expertise in this area in order to develop an appropriate instrument or set of measures.

Task Force Recommendations: assessment of the major

In developing recommendations for campuses to follow in assessing academic major programs, the Task Force followed the same general assumptions that guided its recommendations for the assessment of general education, and also relied heavily on newly-revised program review guidelines developed by the University Faculty Senate,

published as the Guide for the Evaluation of Undergraduate Academic Programs (2001). Specifically, there was great emphasis on the inclusion of student learning outcomes as measures of interest in program review, the role of teaching faculty in developing and implementing assessment plans for academic programs, adherence to local curriculum review and governance processes in the process, the need for autonomy and flexibility in program assessment to reflect existing diversity among academic disciplines, and the need for caution at the institutional level with respect to the use and reporting of assessment data from individual programs. As an additional recommendation, the Task Force stated that assessment of the major should be exclusively campus-based, although guidelines for reporting major assessment findings for each program to System Administration annually were provided. The Task Force also recommended that all academic majors should be assessed every five to seven years and that external reviewers be incorporated into the assessment process whenever feasible.

Implementing the SUNY Assessment Initiative: campus-based general education assessment

Over the summer of 2000, the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes distributed a draft report complete with recommendations across SUNY campuses, with copies going to all college presidents and faculty governance leaders for review and feedback. Subsequently, the group prepared and submitted a final report to the University Provost in November 2000. The University Provost accepted the report without revision, and distributed it to all campus presidents and chief academic officers for implementation.

According to the time-line established by the Task Force, implementation of academic major program assessment was to begin in 2001–2002, based on the premise that program review had been an ongoing process for many years across the university and therefore would not require extensive coordination and planning. Implementation of campus-based general education assessment, however, was scheduled for fall 2002, giving campuses time to develop assessment plans by March 2002 and have them reviewed and approved by the SUNY-wide GEAR group. The remainder of this paper focuses on the activities of the GEAR group, the development of campus-based assessment plans for general education, and the status of campus-based general education assessment across SUNY to this point.

Role of the GEAR Group in Guiding and Supporting Campus-based General Education Assessment

In January 2002 leadership from SUNY System Administration and SUNY's university-wide governance bodies formed the GEAR group and charged it to review and approve campus plans for assessing general education. This 18-member group consists largely of faculty from across SUNY, but also includes professional staff members—for the most part institutional research staff—two students, one chief academic officer, and the Associate Provost of the university. The group is co-chaired by a faculty member from a SUNY four-year campus and the Associate Provost.

Following guidelines provided in the Task Force report, the GEAR group has responsibility for reviewing and approving initial campus general education assessment plans and for providing ongoing review of those plans on a biennial basis. It is important to note that the GEAR group's review of campus plans focuses on the assessment

process itself, not assessment outcomes. In this way, emphasis is placed on assessment best practice without introducing an element of possible defensiveness campuses might feel if their assessment program does not yield evidence to support optimal student learning. Overall, the GEAR group's intent is to ensure that campus assessment plans are comprehensive and rigorous and that, when appropriate, campuses are using assessment data to improve teaching and learning in their general education programs.

Another important function of the GEAR group is to support campuses as they work to develop and implement their campus-based general education plans. Toward this end, in June 2001 the group sponsored a conference intended to serve as the official beginning of the campus-based general education assessment process. This conference featured presentations by SUNY institutions that had distinguished themselves in the area of assessment, as well as a keynote address by Dr Candace Young, professor of political science at Truman State University and a leader in that institution's successful efforts to establish a true assessment culture. The GEAR group also established a website (www.cortland.edu/oir/gear) for the purpose of providing regular updates to campuses on the general education assessment process, a listing of pertinent resources, answers to frequently asked questions, and an opportunity for campuses to contact the group regarding questions and concerns. Members of the GEAR group also made many presentations and visited campuses whenever invited in an attempt to make the process as collegial and transparent as possible.

Review of Campus-based General Education Plans: what the GEAR group is looking for

To some extent, the components of campus-based general education plans were determined by the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes in that group's final report, and consisted of the following:

(1) clearly-stated programmatic goals and objectives, to include the learning outcomes in the twelve discipline and competency areas;
(2) description of the learning activities and assignments intended to ensure that goals and objectives are met;
(3) identification of the assessment measures and criteria to be used in determining the extent to which students are achieving programmatic goals and objectives;
(4) description of strategies that are in place for using assessment data to improve programs as appropriate.

This basic 'four-step' approach to assessment was viewed as flexible enough to accommodate the structure and content of virtually any existing general education program. Further, the generic nature of this approach helped to ensure that it is consistent with assessment requirements imposed by Middle States and other accrediting or certification agencies.

Based on feedback received from campuses during and after the June 2001 assessment conference, the GEAR group agreed to provide more detailed guidelines for campuses to follow in developing their general education assessment plans. Specifically, the group established eight criteria—described immediately below—to guide campuses, including a description of the specific information the GEAR group would expect in order for a plan to be approved.

(1) *Student learning outcomes*. As one criterion, campus assessment plans were expected to identify their general education objectives for student learning and

demonstrate that these objectives included the learning outcomes in the twelve discipline and competency areas. The GEAR group made it clear that campuses could also include additional learning objectives specific to their own program.

(2) *Programmatic activities*. For a second criterion, the GEAR group wanted to assure that courses intended to accomplish a particular learning outcome were providing appropriate learning activities. Since the SUNY General Education review process described earlier was designed to confirm that a campus' general education program did encompass all these outcomes, the GEAR group asked campuses to provide their approved general education curriculum as well as a description of procedures for adding courses to their general education program.

(3) *Credibility of measures*. Campuses were also asked to include in their assessment plan a description of measures to be used in determining program effectiveness, with the GEAR group guidelines stipulating that these measures must provide credible evidence that students are achieving stated objectives. Specifically, in order for measures to be judged credible, the campus had to demonstrate the following: (a) the measures directly measure student learning (i.e., as opposed to student or faculty perceptions of learning); (b) the measures are characterized by reasonable face validity; (c) the measures can be scored reliably by two independent raters (especially in the case of qualitative measures that do not yield 'one correct answer'); and (d) data are collected such that the measures yield representative results in those cases when not all courses or all students are being included in a particular assessment. With respect to this last point, it is important to note that the GEAR group recognized the difficulties inherent in requiring campuses to include all students—or even all course sections—in the assessment of a particular outcome. Therefore, sampling procedures were encouraged, as long as appropriate sampling methodologies were employed.

(4) *Standards of student performance*. Campus assessment plans were also expected to include for each measure standards to which student performance relative to the learning outcomes can be compared. Specifically, the GEAR group asked that plans indicate what level of student performance the faculty considers as 'exceeding', 'meeting', 'approaching', and 'not meeting' standards.

(5) *Relating assessment results to program improvements*. As a fifth criterion, campuses needed to demonstrate that mechanisms existed within their institution for aggregating assessment data in a meaningful way, sharing the results with appropriate faculty and staff, and making programmatic improvements based on the assessment results as appropriate.

(6) *Involvement of appropriate curriculum and faculty governance bodies*. Campuses were asked to include in their assessment plan a description of the process through which the plan was developed and approved on the campus prior to being shared with the GEAR group (the group provided a sign-off sheet to accompany the submitted assessment plan that included the signatures of the campus' chief academic officer and the faculty governance leader).

(7) *Timetable for implementation*. As a seventh criterion, campuses needed to include in their plan a schedule demonstrating that, across a three-year cycle beginning with the 2002–2003 academic year, all of the learning outcomes in general education would be assessed.

(8) *Evaluation of the assessment and dissemination of results*. Finally, campuses needed to demonstrate in their plan that mechanisms existed within the institution for

evaluating the assessment process itself, making changes as needed, and sharing assessment results with appropriate members of the campus community.

Reviews of Campus-based General Education Assessment Plans: current status

In March 2002 the GEAR group began receiving the first campus-based general education plans for review. The group had developed detailed review sheets that matched the eight criteria described above and agreed to have all members review four or five plans and hold discussion sessions on them in order to ensure consistency in reviewing the plans. These sessions took place as part of the GEAR group's regular monthly meetings, with invitations extended to all SUNY campuses to send representatives to observe the review process of at least one assessment plan. (Of course, plans were included in this public review process only after it had been determined that they were of high quality and permission had been obtained from the campus' chief academic officer.) These public meetings served a number of valuable purposes, such as providing an opportunity for other campuses to see effective plans as well as to witness firsthand the deliberation process being used by the GEAR group to review plans. In addition, feedback from the meetings indicated that institutions viewed the willingness of the GEAR group to engage in this process so publicly very favorably, and felt such openness sent a positive message regarding how the assessment process might be characterized by university-wide collegiality and dialogue.

Once the GEAR group was confident that all members were reviewing the campus-based assessment plans in a consistent fashion, three-member teams were formed and a schema was developed for distributing an equal number of remaining plans to each team. Teams were assigned a leader, who had responsibility for compiling all team reviews for a particular plan and providing an integrated summary review. Great emphasis was placed on providing specific feedback to campuses, especially when the plan was not approved, so that campuses could use that information to improve the plan for resubmission. Once a review was completed, it was sent to the Associate Provost (the GEAR group's co-chair), and an official notification letter went out from that office on behalf of the GEAR group to the campus' chief academic officer. As plans were approved, they became available as resources for other campuses interested in reviewing them, with permission from the campus.

As of August 2002, 56 of 57 campuses had submitted campus-based general education assessment plans to SUNY System Administration, 56 had been reviewed by the GEAR group review teams, and 38 had been approved. Six plans are close to approval, requiring only minor modifications, meaning that nearly all SUNY campuses are close to having approved plans in place. The remaining campuses will need to resubmit their plans until approved, with the GEAR group continuing to apply high standards in the review process.

A frank appraisal of our progress in implementing the SUNY Assessment Initiative's campus-based general education assessment process to this point is somewhat mixed. Of course, the optimal outcome would be for all 57 campuses to have approved plans in place by the beginning of the 2002–2003 academic year. Such expectations, however, would have been unrealistic given the fact that there is so much heterogeneity in general education programs themselves across the university and, more important, in the state of assessment activities and expertise across our campuses. Some SUNY campuses now have assessment programs in place to rival any best practice assessment institution in the country. A number of institutions, however, are at the beginning of their efforts to

implement a real assessment culture, due to a variety of factors likely ranging from inadequate resources to faculty resistance or indifference to apparently weak administrative commitment or leadership. However, it is the university's firm expectation that all campuses will achieve full implementation in 2002–2003.

As a related comment, it is important to observe that, throughout the review process, the GEAR group has maintained its role as a peer review group, providing support and collegial peer feedback to campuses and encouraging the development of a true assessment culture. As such, the GEAR group is not at all involved in issues related to campuses' compliance with the SUNY Assessment Initiative guidelines. Rather, those issues are the purview of the University Provost, who addresses them as appropriate with campus leadership.

Supporting the SUNY Assessment Initiative

As observed earlier, the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes advocated persuasively that effective implementation of the SUNY Assessment Initiative would require considerable support at both the System Administration and institutional levels. While emphasis was placed on actual fiscal support, the Task Force stated that it was especially important as well that System Administration bring outcomes assessment to the forefront as a priority, giving it high visibility in its publications and messages to campuses.

Since the completion of the Task Force report, SUNY System Administration has demonstrated its clear intent to promote and support the implementation of the SUNY Assessment Initiative across the university. Specific examples include its sponsorship of the general education assessment conference in June 2001, development and maintenance for the GEAR group website, and ongoing funding for travel by GEAR group members, primarily to meetings but also to visit campuses and attend assessment conferences. Further, for the 2001–2002 academic year System Administration distributed approximately $100,000 to nine campuses as part of a competitive assessment incentive grant program. Other important contributions include ongoing administrative support and oversight for the SUNY Assessment Initiative, ensuring that campuses are meeting the expectations laid out in the guidelines, that assessment plans are distributed for review in a timely fashion, and that appropriate records are maintained of project status. System Administration has also established an assessment list serve that goes out on a regular basis to appropriate persons across the University as well as an *Assessment Update* which informs campuses on a regular basis regarding GEAR group and other assessment-related activities. In Summer 2002 the SUNY Provost's Office sponsored two workshops for campuses seeking assistance with their general education assessment plan development, with GEAR group members meeting individually with campus representatives as requested. Finally, in fall 2003 a university-wide conference will be held featuring those institutions that have been especially successful implementing their campus-based assessment plans, with representatives from all SUNY campuses invited.

Despite these significant successes, some disappointments remain. Most important, the university has been unable as yet to allocate new resources to the SUNY Assessment Initiative as recommended by the Task Force and campuses have had to undertake implementation of the initiative using existing resources. This factor at least partially explains the failure of some campuses to show much progress to date, especially where institutions have not previously made a commitment to assessment.

Conclusions

It is clearly too early to project with any certainty the eventual success of the SUNY Assessment Initiative, with these efforts still very much in their infancy stage. Much depends on the continued commitment by System Administration to 'stay the course', promoting and supporting outcomes assessment as a university-wide priority, and individual institutions' ability to generate faculty buy-in and instill an assessment culture on their campus. In addition, there is a real need at both the system and campus levels to procure and allocate resources that will enable the realization of a high quality, comprehensive assessment program. Finally, the climate of good faith that has been established to this point between System Administration and campuses in implementing campus-based assessment of general education must be maintained.

While much remains unknown, what is clear already is that a solid foundation has been established, with a key component being SUNY System Administration's relatively low-key and non-intrusive approach, which basically reflects a confidence that faculty university-wide are doing their jobs well and that they are in the best position to determine the effectiveness of their own teaching. An equally important component has been the seriousness with which most campuses have responded to the SUNY Assessment Initiative, in full recognition of their responsibility to demonstrate the efficacy of their curriculum programs. In other words, System Administration and campus faculty and academic leadership have become partners in the assessment process, with the former showing a remarkable willingness to encourage autonomy in this process and the latter demonstrating a similar willingness to acknowledge assessment's accountability function. Ultimately, it is the sustainability of this partnership—combined with procedures and guidelines that reflect best assessment practices—that will determine the long-term success of the SUNY Assessment Initiative.

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