

## **HLC Report Executive Summary**

On April 7-8, 2008, two site visitors will be on campus to evaluate progress made at the University of North Dakota (UND) on assessment of student learning. This will be a mandated follow-up to the Fall 2003 accreditation site visit from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association. In the report written after that visit, UND was informed of several institutional deficiencies regarding assessment of student learning. For example:

- All programs should have learning goals identified.
- All programs should be using direct measures of student learning (i.e., evidence collected from systematic examination of student work products or performances).
- Assessment of student learning is “neither consistently understood nor consistently implemented” by UND faculty, which must be corrected.
- Assessment in general education and graduate degree programs (as well as a handful of specifically identified undergraduate programs) was inadequate.
- Many programs relied too heavily on indirect assessment (i.e., surveys and other tools for collecting perceptions about learning).
- All programs should be able to identify actions they have taken, based on assessment data, to improve student learning.

As a result of the inadequacies in assessment, the university was told that it would receive a focused visit on assessment in 2007-08. During the focused visit, the university would be required to demonstrate that significant progress had been made on assessment, and that systems were in place to ensure the continuation of that progress.

UND has indeed made significant progress since the last comprehensive visit and those negative comments regarding assessment activities. Several kinds of evidence serve to demonstrate the progress that has been made in the past few years:

- Effective systems are in place to ensure that assessment plans are developed and implemented for all academic programs and units with student learning and development within their mission – leading to almost 100% compliance with this “first step” in effective assessment.
- Regular review of assessment activities occurs through the University Assessment Committee, along with feedback to departments (and to deans responsible for those departments) and other units.
- Extensive faculty development has created greater knowledgeability about assessment among faculty and staff across campus; furthermore, this heightened expertise is widely dispersed and continues to spread.
- There are people and positions with assessment of student learning as a designated area of responsibility; yet most work is done by and responsibility rests with the faculty and staff who conduct assessment for their own programs and oversee campus-wide assessment through their committee service (including departmental and college committees, the University Assessment Committee, and the General Education Requirements Committee).
- All departments now have assessment plans for their own programs; most non-departmental (interdisciplinary) programs and non-academic units with student learning as part of their mission have plans as well.

- Many departments have reached the “loop-closing” stage of assessment, and can now serve as models for others, demonstrating both the feasibility of meaningful assessment and the value of such work.
- Assessment is a priority in general education and has led to important changes.

On the other hand, challenges remain. For example:

- It is very difficult to “reward” faculty engagement in assessment at a level commensurate with the time it takes to get an effective program of assessment up and running – and until such a program is well-established, the likelihood of highly interesting findings is minimal. Faculty need to see “highly interesting findings” in order for the process (and work) to become intrinsically rewarding.
- Some departments/programs and some faculty lag behind. It is especially easy for this to occur in departments with no professional accreditation and a strong research tradition. Assessment of student learning – and other aspects of teaching improvement – may not be perceived as of sufficient centrality to expectations for tenure, promotion, and merit pay in order for the work to be done thoughtfully and thoroughly. A few faculty likely will never engage in meaningful assessment of student learning as a means of program improvement.
- Programs that are not owned by a single department can easily slip through the cracks of assessment. No one feels responsible for the program, no one is compensated for program-specific work, and no one is obligated to report on the program (or make decisions about improving it). Progress has been made, but this is an area for on-going monitoring within the institution.
- Learning to document data collection and use has been a challenge, making it difficult to fully track assessment that occurs. The pressure of reporting on assessment within the annual report is a means of encouraging chairs and directors to ensure that the collection, analysis, and use of data are documented.

Finally, it is critically important that the university continue to emphasize assessment of student learning (and other practices related to effective teaching and learning) to provide additional time for the culture of assessment to become well-established. Momentum is being achieved and a culture of assessment is being established. But in the early years, such changes are fragile and can quickly disappear. Until a strong tradition of assessment is established across higher education, it will remain particularly important that upper level administrators continue their strong support for high quality assessment. Actions and practices that have enabled progress must continue, including the following:

- Faculty development and support for assessment must continue to be available, likely through the Assistant Provost and the Office of Instructional Development.
- Funds must be available to support innovative assessment projects, to support occasions at which assessment findings can be discussed, and to support travel related to learning about assessment and presenting at assessment conferences.
- University committees, especially the University Assessment Committee and the General Education Requirements Committee, must continue active involvement in the oversight of assessment activities within their purview.
- Faculty must perceive that assessment is highly valued as a part of teaching and, when appropriate, as a form of teaching and learning scholarship – and that work in this area will be viewed as important during decisions on tenure, promotion, and merit pay.