

HLC Report

How are we doing on assessment of student learning?

Background: Why This Site Visit?

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.

Improvements in Institutional Commitment

UND has indeed made significant progress since the last comprehensive visit and those negative comments regarding assessment activities. The university has increased the percentage of administrative time dedicated to assessment oversight (50% of an assistant provost position) and some colleges and programs have made similar decisions (e.g., creation an associate dean position within the graduate school with assessment as a primary area of responsibility; active supervision of programmatic assessment within BPA under a college-wide committee and an associate dean). Other administrators and faculty have increased their knowledgeability about assessment, resulting in significant increases in institutional capacity for and commitment to high quality assessment activity. Some colleges have added specific events to increase awareness of assessment and use of assessment findings (e.g., “Assessment Day” in EHD), and other colleges have made decisions about how to share and use data up to individual departments (e.g., Arts & Sciences). Non-academic units with student learning and development within their missions have initiated assessment activities. On the whole, these changes represent significant strides.

Improvements in Committee Oversight

UND committees, especially the University Assessment Committee (UAC) and the General Education Requirements Committee (GERC), have implemented policies and procedures to support quality assessment efforts. Among the accomplishments of the UAC are the following:

- A recently developed (2006) assessment plan is posted on the UAC website, and that plan is now under revision to reflect changes occurring in the general education program.
- Resources to aid departments in developing and carrying out assessment plans are available on the UAC website.
- Assessment plans are posted for degree programs and other units with responsibility for student learning and development on the UAC website.
- The annual reports for all departments and other units with responsibility for student learning and development are now expected to include details about assessment activities and findings.
- The assessment sections of annual reports are reviewed by UAC members on a cyclical basis (1/3 of academic departments per year, 1/3 of relevant non-academic departments per year), information is collected for institutional use, and results of the review are sent back to the department with comments about means of improving assessment activities in the future.

Members of the GERC expect to see assessment findings reported as part of every course revalidation, including comments about any loop-closing activities that may grow out of those findings. In addition, several major studies of general education outcomes have been completed, and findings from those studies affected decisions about the new Essential Studies program.

Improvements at the Department Level

The core of assessment of student learning activities occurs at the departmental level. Almost 100% of all degree-granting programs and many non-degree-granting programs and non-academic units at UND now have assessment plans posted on the university website. Many of those plans are in a second or third iteration, with the department having learned from attempting to implement a first version that changes in the goals or assessment methods were desirable. Significant percentages (varying by college, by type of program, and by level of program) have reported results, findings, and/or loop-closing activities. Many additional programs should reach that loop-closing stage within the next couple of years. In every college, a number of different and significant loop-closing activities have been reported.

These findings do not signify total success, but total success is a moving target and takes time to achieve. However, they do signify that more programs, more departments, and more faculty and staff are

- recognizing the need to pay attention to what students are learning as well as what the faculty member intends to teach;
- recognizing the need to collect and review information systematically;
- achieving some benefits from assessment that demonstrate the value, in terms of student learning, of conducting assessment.

Looking Forward

In order to maintain this progress, the university must maintain its commitment to assessment of student learning, continue to make resources available to support assessment activities and scholarship around assessment, and find ways to value assessment activities in teaching and scholarship as well as service.