

University of Nebraska – Lincoln

**Report on the
Assessment of Educational Experiences
and Learning Outcomes at UNL**

August 2004

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this institutional assessment report is to describe activities involving the assessment and improvement of educational experiences and learning outcomes for students at UNL. The report is organized into two main summaries.

The first is a summary of assessment activities occurring at the college/department level. These activities assess academic programs under purview of the academic colleges and department (i.e. majors, graduate programs) and were conducted by academic units in the 2001-02 and 2002-03 academic years.¹

The second is a summary of assessment activities occurring at the institutional level. These activities assess programs not under the purview of any one academic college (i.e. learning communities) or assess educational experiences and learning across educational programs (i.e. National Survey of Student Engagement). These activities were conducted at the institutional level during 2002-03 and 2003-04 academic years

The last institutional assessment report was written in the Fall 2002 in response to a mandate from the Higher Learning Commission/North Central Association (HLC/NCA) for a progress report. The commission accepted UNL's reported progress in its assessment of student academic achievement and required no further reports until the next comprehensive evaluation scheduled for the 2006-07 academic year.

The cycle for this report has changed from every year to every other year. This change corresponds with the same change to the reporting cycle for academic colleges. Starting in 2002-03, academic colleges were asked to report every other year instead of annually. Therefore, colleges did not submit a report on their 2001-02 assessment activities and instead submitted a report in 2003-04 on their 2001-02 and 2002-03 assessment activities.² The new cycle also allows the institutional assessment report to alternate with a report on UNL's participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). UNL participated in the 2002 NSSE for the first time in 2001-02. Survey results were received and reported on in 2002-03. Following a plan to participate in the NSSE survey every two years, UNL participated for a second time in the 2004 NSSE in 2003-04. Results for the 2004 NSSE were just received and will be reported on this academic year.

This report indicates that the implementation of assessment activities and the use of that assessment evidence by academic units have remained fairly stable since the 2000-01 academic year. The assessment activities at the institutional level continue to progress and mature.

¹ The most recent report from academic colleges about their assessment activities was collected in the 2003-04 academic year and covered activities conducted in 2001-02 and 2002-03. The next report from academic colleges and their departments will be requested in the 2005-06 academic year and will cover activities conducted in 2003-04 and 2004-05 academic years.

² At the time this decision was made the College of Arts and Sciences had already collected reports from their academic units for 2001-02. Therefore, Arts and Sciences submitted those reports in the Spring 2003 and will submit their next report from academic units in the Spring 2005.

II. Assessment in the Academic College

This section of the report describes the assessment activities of undergraduate and graduate academic units during the 2001-02 and 2002-03 academic years. This summary is based on reports submitted by those units in the 2003-04 academic year. This section also covers recent changes to the reporting process and future possibilities.

A. Changes in the Reporting Process

Since 1996-97 academic colleges and their programs have submitted an annual report on their outcomes assessment activities. These reports greatly assisted UNL in responding to the concerns of our regional accreditation agency, Higher Learning Commission/North Central Association (HLC/NCA), and in determining how assessment of student learning could contribute to the improvement of our academic programs.

Because the assessment process at the program level was evolving it was time for the annual reporting process to evolve as well. Starting in 2002-03, colleges were asked to report every other year instead of annually. Therefore, colleges did not submit a report on their 2001-02 assessment activities and instead submitted a report in 2003-04 on their 2001-02 and 2002-03 assessment activities.³

The hope is that this change will:

- Allow programs to focus more on the assessment activities being conducted rather than reporting on those activities each year.
- Encourage more in depth assessment of and reflection on student learning in the program and at the college level.
- Allow colleges and the institution to begin focusing on broader student learning issues that cross program boundaries.

Although the reporting cycle at the institutional level changed, each college was ask to make their own decision about their college reporting cycle. The colleges were encouraged to base their decision on what would allow them to continue the significant progress they had made in the last six years. Most colleges changed their reporting cycle to every other year. However, a few decided to continue to request reports annually from their programs and only forward those reports every other year.

B. Progress of Assessment Activities

In Fall 2002, a process for tracking the progress of assessment activities in academic units was developed. This resulted in set of indicators for reviewing this progress over time. See Appendix A for a complete description of how and why these progress indicators were identified and developed.

Data for determining progress on the indicators is based on assessment reports from academic colleges and their departments. Although information from these reports is rich, it is not comprehensive. These reports do not always capture the varied and complex ways in which evidence of student learning is

³ At the time this decision was made the College of Arts and Sciences had already collected reports from their academic units for 2001-02. Therefore, Arts and Sciences submitted those reports in the Spring 2003 and will submit their next report from academic units in the Spring 2005.

a part of the understanding, discussions, and decisions about educational programs. Although our understanding of the role that outcomes assessment does and will play at our institution has increased significantly, establishing a cohesive relationship between outcomes assessment and improving educational programs is an on-going effort.

Reports from 1999 (1998-99 Academic Year), 2001 (2000-01 Academic Year), and 2003 (2001-02/2002-03 Academic Years) are used to document progress on each indicator. These dates were chosen to: 1) compare information on assessment efforts that were shared with a HLC/NCA focus visit team in Fall 1999 and in a progress report submitted to the HLC/NCA in December 2002 and 2) update the indicators with information from the most recent reports from academic colleges.

Progress in the assessment activities for undergraduate and graduate programs are presented separately because of how UNL gradually rolled out its outcomes assessment plans. Initial efforts in 1997 focused on the undergraduate major. Assessment of graduate programs, although already occurring in some programs, was formally initiated in 2000-01. Therefore, these two efforts occur at different paces. Appendices B, C, and D contain graphs and a complete analysis for the progress indicators.

The following is a summary of the conclusions about progress occurring in 69 undergraduate units in 2001-02 and 2002-03:

- In 2003 slightly fewer undergraduate units submitted a report on their assessment activities than in 2001. Without a report it is unclear whether these undergraduate units implemented any assessment activities. Despite this slip in reporting the number of undergraduate units who are implementing assessment activities continues to remain steady. Three-quarters of all undergraduate units reported implementing assessment activities.⁴
- The percentage of undergraduate units that use their assessment results for improvement continues to hold steady in 2003. At least 65% of the 69 undergraduate units are using assessment results for improvement. If only those undergraduate units who are implementing assessment activities are considered, 88% of those undergraduate units are using results for improvement.⁵
- Approximately one-third of all undergraduate units use assessment results to take actions that address educational issues, identify and discuss educational issues, and/or improve methods for assessing student learning/educational experience. Although in 2003 there were fewer undergraduate units taking actions there were more undergraduate units identifying and discussing educational issues.⁶
- About one-third of all the actions and discussions reported by undergraduate units are based on evidence from student work (e.g. capstone course products, portfolios, essays, and exams). The other two-thirds of actions and discussions reported by undergraduate units are based on evidence from student perceptions (e.g. student surveys, alumni surveys, and reflections on learning).⁷

⁴ See Appendix B1, Percentage of undergraduate units having and implementing an outcomes assessment plan

⁵ See Appendix B2, Percentage of undergraduate units using assessment results

⁶ See Appendix B3, How academic units are using outcomes assessment results

⁷ See Appendix B4, Contribution of different types of evidence to results

- Learning outcomes that need improvement and the coherence of the curriculum continue to account for a majority of the issues raised about educational programs (74%) but advising received more attention in 2003 (12%).⁸
- Changes in courses, the curriculum, and the program continue to account for a majority of the actions taken by undergraduate units (73%) but there also continues to be some variety. Other changes involve enhancing education that occurs outside of courses (10%) and improving communication (17%).⁹
- In 2003, more or all of the undergraduate units in six of the eight academic colleges used assessment for improvement.¹⁰ This occurred despite that two of these six colleges had fewer undergraduate units implementing assessment activities in 2003.¹¹ The two colleges that had fewer undergraduate units implementing assessment activities and using assessment for improvement were the College of Engineering and Technology and College of Education and Human Sciences.

The following is a summary of the progress occurring in 61 graduate units in 2001-02 and 2002-03:

- In 2003 fewer graduate units submitted a report on their assessment activities than in 2001. Without a report it is unclear whether these graduate units implemented any assessment activities. One-third of all graduate units reported implementing assessment activities.¹²
- The percentage of graduate units using their assessment results decreased slightly in 2003. At least 21% of the 61 graduate units are using assessment results for improvement. If only those graduate units who are implementing assessment activities are considered, at least 60% of those graduate units are using results for improvement.¹³

Discussion and Conclusions:

- Although fewer units reported on their assessment activities in 2003, the reports that were submitted indicate that if assessment activities are implemented it is likely that information will be used for improvement.¹⁴ This result suggests that when academic units do engage in assessment it is usually informative to the unit and more than an exercise in data collection. However, the decrease in the number of units reporting on their assessment activities and the decrease in the number of units implementing assessment activities in some academic colleges needs to be reversed to confirm UNL's commitment to assessment as an on-going process.
- A variety of important programmatic issues continue to be raised as a result of assessment efforts, with a majority of these about curriculum and pedagogy.¹⁶ In addition, the kinds of actions taken appear to be relevant for addressing these issues.¹⁷ This result suggests that assessment efforts continue to highlight issues that result in actions that directly effect students.

⁸ See Appendix B5, Types of issues raised about educational programs from assessment results

⁹ See Appendix B6, Types of actions taken in response to issues raised on assessment results

¹⁰ See Appendix C3, Percentage of undergraduate units from each college using outcomes assessment results

¹¹ See Appendix C2, Percentage of undergraduate units from each college implementing outcomes assessment plans

¹² See Appendix D1, Percentage of graduate units implementing an outcomes assessment plan

¹³ See Appendix D2, Percentage of graduate units using assessment results

¹⁴ See Appendices B2, C3, and D2.

¹⁶ See Appendix B5, Types of issues raised about educational programs from assessment results

¹⁷ See Appendix B6, Types of actions taken in response to issues raised on assessment results

- Most of the academic units that were classified as not having an assessment plan did not submit an assessment report. Without a report it is difficult to conclude whether the academic unit was or was not involved in implementing assessment activities. There might be several reasons for this decrease in reporting and probably engagement in assessment. Reasons could include a difficult two years of budget reductions and strained resources, perception of assessment as an “unfunded” mandate, not understanding the value or potential contribution of the outcomes assessment process, lack of support and encouragement by the institution and academic colleges, and the recent change in the college reporting cycle. A pilot for a new reporting system (discussed in the next section) could potentially address some of these issues.
- Student work and student perceptions are types of assessment methods that have been effectively implemented and informative in understanding the effectiveness of educational programs. However, because a student’s perception of their learning is not as rich as a student demonstrating their learning in the future student work should be the preferred method for collecting assessment evidence.

C. Piloting of New Reporting System

The need for a more systematic and comprehensive process of program planning has arisen out of changing expectations in higher education, particularly in the area of assessment of student learning outcomes. In June 2004, representatives from the College of Education and Human Sciences (CEHS), College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR), and the Office of Undergraduate Studies traveled to Colorado State University (CSU) to learn more about CSU’s system for managing program planning and improvement of academic programs in the areas of 1) assessment of student learning outcomes, 2) faculty research/scholarship, and 3) faculty service/outreach. Dean Marjorie Kostelnik who was introduced to the CSU system encouraged the visit and has provided leadership for pursuing the use of the system.

CEHS and CASNR have decided to collaborate on acquiring and implementing the existing CSU system. The on-line program will be piloted during the 2004-05 and 2005-06 academic years. It is recognized that this system provides a management tool that addresses more than just the assessment of student learning outcomes; however, the system can offer a more efficient, timely and much needed mechanism for campus-wide coordination of the assessment of student learning outcomes to:

- Provide consistent formatting across academic programs so gathering information for decision making at the administrative level is facilitated.
- Assist programs in coordinating multiple reporting requirements for regional accreditation, specialized accreditation, and UNL’s Academic Program Review. Academic Program Reviews require an academic unit to report its choice of assessment techniques, measurement(s), student learning outcomes, and corresponding changes made in the curriculum and program requirements. An on-line system could provide supportive documentation for each reporting requirement.
- Address regional and professional accrediting agencies expectations that institutions and their academic programs plan with an outcomes orientation rather than a traditional resource orientation. This would assist in addressing the new criteria for accreditation established by the

Higher Learning Commission/North Central Association (HLC/NCA) in UNL's next accreditation visit in 2006-07.

- Incorporate programmatic efforts to assess student learning outcomes into a broader planning process that addresses the three missions of the institution (teaching, research, and service).
- Increase access and sharing among faculty and academic programs of unit plans, best practices, and methods/instruments.

Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Rita Kean, has submitted a proposal requesting funding for this pilot because the CSU system has the potential to contribute university-wide.

III. Assessment at Institutional Level

At the institutional level there are a variety of efforts that have occurred since 2001-02 that involve the assessment of UNL's mission and values. Many of these activities have been initiated or facilitated by the newly developed Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies (OUS). The OUS coordinates, administers, and advocates for campus-wide policies, programs, and initiatives affecting undergraduate education, particularly those activities outside the academic degree programs and individual majors. Other UNL offices and organizations have been involved as well. When relevant, those groups are noted in the descriptions that follow.

A. Proposed Modifications to the Comprehensive Education Program¹⁵

In December 2003, a report was submitted by an ad hoc committee established by the Academic Senate to address calls for reform in UNL's Comprehensive Education Program (CEP). The UNL Comprehensive Education Program (CEP) was introduced in 1995. It is an innovative program comprised of two main parts: essential studies (ES) which aim at developing breadth in the student experience and integrative studies (IS) which seek to develop higher-order learning, notably written communication, oral expression, critical thinking and consideration of human diversity. While the ES and IS programs are thought to play a critical role in undergraduate education, they have not been as effective as envisioned and this has led to calls for reform. In response, the Academic Senate established an ad hoc committee charged with proposing modifications based on the following principles: 1) uniformity across colleges; 2) simplification; 3) no increase in general education credit hour requirements; and 4) consideration of the original principles of the CEP.

The committee sought to strengthen the current program and to explore ways of making it more effective, accessible, transparent, and easier to understand. The purpose and objectives of both the ES and IS programs were seen as laudable. The proposal focused more on changes in the administration of the program and assessment of outcomes for general education rather than on revising the conceptual basis upon which they rest. The committee believed that the broad objectives targeted by the ES program are best handled by university-wide requirements as described below. On the other hand, the learning objectives embodied in the IS program seem difficult to accomplish outside students' majors. The current CEP gives control of the ES program to the Colleges with the IS program administered on a university-wide basis. The proposal described below shifts control of IS to degree programs and their academic units while calling for a university-wide general education program. The committee believes these adjustments will strengthen the general educational requirements at UNL and generate better learning outcomes for our students.

Following the approval of the Academic Senate, the proposal is scheduled to be voted on by the Colleges in fall 2004. This proposal will be sent to the colleges for approval. If approved, the Colleges agree to direct their academic units in the construction of the general education lists and, subsequently, to accept any course on the UNL list in fulfillment of the general education requirements. They also agree to create mechanisms for the development of unit plans related to

¹⁵ Text was taken from *Proposed Modifications in the UNL Comprehensive Education Program (December 2003)* <http://www.unl.edu/asenate/ESISproposal.htm>.

writing, oral communication, critical thinking and considerations of diversity and to incorporate these plans into the assessment, accreditation, and program review processes.

As of August 15, 2004, UNL welcomed a new Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. The new SVCAA will need time to gain an understanding of the issues surrounding CEP so that she can provide her own input. Because CEP is such an integral issue to the academic quality of undergraduate education, the Office of Undergraduate Studies proposed a request for funding a collection of profile data that assesses the curriculum of the Comprehensive Education Program. Activities would include a focused analysis of the most highly subscribed Essential and Integrative Studies courses. An exercise of this sort would have implications beyond the CEP program and provide the Enrollment Management Council (EMC) information about first year course demand. Results from the spring 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement might also yield useful information about the CEP curriculum.

B. Institutional Indicators of Quality¹⁶

The second “report card” measuring UNL’s progress towards the goals and aspirations of the campus’s *A 2020 Vision*¹⁷ was provided in 2003. The report was initiated at the request of the University of Nebraska Board of Regents for UNL to develop a set of quality indicators to monitor our performance. Five areas of indicators were identified and one of those directly relates to outcomes for undergraduate student learning and achievement. Some of the guidelines used for choosing the quality indicators included consistency with UNL’s vision, output instead of input measures, and a measure across UNL and peer universities over time.

The quality indicators for undergraduate learning and achievement reflect continuing improvement. The six-year graduation rate continues a steady path of improvement. In the last four years, the graduation rate has climbed from 47% to 54%. The gap between UNL and peer universities continues to narrow. The three-year number of nationally competitive general awards for undergraduate students continues to increase, causing the gap between UNL and our peers to greatly lessen. The percentage of student who report participating in a research or creative-activity experience was very similar in the last two years with approximately one-third of all students indicating that they had participated in a “meaningful” research or creative activity in conjunction with a faculty member.

The quality indicators for graduate, professional, and post-doctoral education indicate the number of Fulbright Scholarships and National Science Foundation Fellowships won by graduate and professional students, based on three-year totals, has remained fairly constant. On a per capita basis UNL students are as successful as students at most of our peer institutions at receiving these awards. On another indicator the number of doctorates granted is on a slight downward trend and the number of master’s degrees granted varies from year to year. The number of post-doctoral appointees increased by 73.5% between 1997-98 and 2002-03.

¹⁶ Text taken from Indicators of Institutional Quality: Annual Report 2003 (www.unl.edu/svcaa/quality/report2003.pdf).

¹⁷ *A 2020 Vision: The Future of Research and Graduate Education at UNL* (www.unl.edu/svcaa/priorities/future/report.pdf).

C. Blue Sky Report

In the Fall 2002 the Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs charged a faculty committee to consider the data from several sources including the first annual report on Institutional Quality Indicators and the 2002 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to gain an understanding about what the data from these sources suggest about UNL when considered jointly. The committee also met with Professor Richard Light of Harvard University who was on campus to discuss his research on the undergraduate experience and the committee's work.

The committee's deliberations produced a vision report titled *Intellectual Engagement and Achievement at UNL*. The central themes that emerged are the fundamental importance of challenge and engagement for students, staff, and faculty; the need at a land-grant research university to integrate the generation and mastery of new knowledge with the communication of this knowledge to students and to the people of Nebraska, the nation, and the world; and the requirement for continuing self-assessment, with a focus on outcomes, so that we know ourselves and our achievements.

The report provides a number of specific recommendations for the undergraduate experience, the graduate experience, and the experience of faculty and staff that relate to the central themes.¹⁸ These recommendations prompted several subsequent efforts such as the creation of the Transition to University Taskforce and the increased sampling for the 2004 NSSE.

D. National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

In the Spring 2002, a sampling of UNL students participated for the first time in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).¹⁹ The NSSE offered UNL a tool for gathering information with a wide range of uses and provides an important occasion to re-frame local conversations about collegiate quality, as it did with the Blue Sky Committee. In particular, the results are expected to be useful to UNL in improving undergraduate education. For example, the data will be useful to UNL in gauging the degree to which we foster practices to improve performance consistent with characteristics and commitments. This first administration of the 2002 NSSE was considered a benchmark of student engagement. Comparisons between this benchmark administration and future participation will provide UNL better identification of strengths as well as areas for improvement.

The Blue Sky Committee summarized the results from the 2002 survey as follows:

Three-fourths of UNL seniors believe that the academic quality at UNL is “*good to excellent*.” Over 80% of UNL students reported that they had a positive educational experience, were pleased with the instructional quality of their courses, and would attend UNL again for undergraduate work. Although, these latter findings are generally encouraging, the students at the AAU institutions rated some of these items higher, suggesting that there is room for improvement (p. 12).

In the spring 2004 UNL participated for a second time in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE surveys first-year and senior students about their college experience, how much time they spend studying, and the types of interactions they have with faculty. UNL's participation in the 2004 survey was enhanced in several ways. In 2004, UNL participated in

¹⁸ *Intellectual Engagement and Achievement at UNL: Report from the Blue Sky Committee* (March 2003)
<http://www.unl.edu/svcaa/priorities/bluesky.pdf>.

¹⁹ UNL's *National Survey of Student Engagement Report 2002* can be found at
<http://www.unl.edu/ous/priorities/assessment/nsse02.pdf>

the web version of the survey that provided a substantially larger sample of first-year and senior students. Instead of sampling 500 students from each class, 1500 students from each class were sampled. Also, additional students from each college were sampled based on a recommendation from the Blue Sky report so results could be reasonably be analyzed at the college as well as institutional level. Surveys were also sent to all students of color to increase the number of responses received from those groups.

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 these issues. The FSSE survey is designed to measure faculty expectations for student engagement in educational practices that are empirically linked with high levels of learning and development. A sampling of instructors of all levels and across all disciplines was asked to participate via email this spring.

NSSE and FSSE data will be received this fall and forwarded to colleges so that use of the data can occur at both levels.

E. Transition to University Taskforce²⁰

The Transition to University Taskforce was appointed in May 2003 by Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Richard Edwards to review and assess the effectiveness of first-year undergraduate orientation programs and courses. This review was to result in a proposed framework or plan for coordinating and supporting these separate programs. The Taskforce members believed all entering students (first year and transfer students) would be best served by a core educational experience that orients all to UNL academically and socially. To gain a better understanding of the undergraduate experience at UNL, the Task Force requested that student focus groups be conducted and met with faculty teaching introductory courses to gain a student and faculty perspective on the first-year college experience. The consideration of this evidence led to several recommendations including the development of a first-year core courses, enhancing academic support with a second fall semester orientation for first-year students, and gaining a better understanding about advising activities. To support these recommendations learning outcomes for both the first-year core course and a fall orientation were identified.

First-Year Core Course

The taskforce's primary recommendation was that all entering students should have access during their first year at UNL to a course that introduces and orients them to the culture and benefits of attending a Research I institution. The core course should 1) challenge students academically and provide the academic support necessary to achieve success, and 2) create excitement among entering students for the discovery, application and evaluation of knowledge, all hallmarks of the comprehensive research university.

The intent of the Task Force's recommendation is for academic units interested in developing a first year core course experience to select one course from their existing stock of first-year courses which would meet the intended learning objectives of the core course experience (see **TUTF Report** pp. 6-8 and Appendix A. **Intended Learning Outcomes of First-year Courses**). These core courses could be interdisciplinary and serve units interested in developing signature, intra-

²⁰ Text taken from the Transition to University Taskforce Report - *Everyone a Teacher, Everyone a Learner* (<http://www.unl.edu/ous/tutf.pdf>).

institutional undergraduate academic programs to enhance the campus learning environment and our reputation for innovative undergraduate programs. The Task Force strongly recommends these courses be open to all incoming students and count towards degree program requirements.

Fall Semester Orientation (Mid-Semester Checkpoint)

The Task Force recommended a second orientation for first year students occurs five to six weeks into the first semester. This would allow the summer orientation (New Student Enrollment (NSE)) to focus on those things students need to know for the immediate start of the academic year. The timing of the mid-semester checkpoint would give students a grace period, or an opportunity to figure out daily life issues that initially overpower their academic issues. Student focus groups document a need for a timely review of academic responsibilities and college and major requirements once students were on campus. A carefully structured interaction would also help students identify advising resources in preparation for early registration for the second semester. At the very least, this meeting should confirm our commitment to provide all students with the tools they need for academic success in a supportive environment. The Task Force developed outcomes for structuring this orientation that differed but complemented the outcomes for the first-year core course (see *TUTF Report* Appendix B. **Intended Learning Outcomes for Mid-Semester Checkpoint**).

Academic Advising

Academic advising and selection of a major program of study are critical to the academic success and retention of first-year students. Students who participated in the TUTF focus groups during Fall 2003 expressed dissatisfaction with their advising experiences, often relying on the unofficial advice of peers, parents and their Resident Assistants. The Task Force believes strongly that the Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs appoint a task force to investigate first and second-year student advising models at other large public research universities, followed by an external review of UNL academic advising processes. The intended outcome is development of student-focused advising model(s) and best practices for advising UNL students.

F. Residential Learning Communities

In Spring 2004, a formal assessment of the impact of residential learning communities (LC) on student participants was conducted. This assessment included collecting data on gpa and retention to determine if differences between students who did and did not participate in a learning community existed, gaining an understanding of type of students who seek participation in a learning community, and administering an open-ended survey of students about their learning community experience.

These analyses suggested that students from out-of-state, from smaller high schools, with a high high school class rank, an above average ACT, and entering either CASNR, Engineering, or Fine and Performing Arts are more likely to be involved in learning communities. Students who score lowest on ACT (21-22), have a class rank below 45%, and are entering Arts and Sciences or General Studies are less likely to be involved. Gender may also possibly influence LC participation.

These analyses also suggest it is difficult to conclude that students' participation in a LC improves their GPA. It does appear that LC participation may play some role in higher retention rates but what LC they are involved in may be a factor. Making conclusions about the contribution of LC participation to retention or GPA is difficult even with statistically significant results because there could be other variables that increase the likelihood a student would participate in a LC as well as continue at UNL such as parental involvement.

A content analysis of student surveys resulted in four significant themes. Participant responses suggest there are four main areas that could be improved. They include:

- Role of RA's and Peer Mentors in leading the LC
- Academic support and engagement of the LC
- Learning communities interaction with faculty
- Types of Activities organized by the LC

A manual for academic units who sponsor a LC is currently being developed and should assist in responding to some of these themes.

G. Undergraduate Creative Activities and Research Experiences (UCARE)

The Undergraduate Creative Activities and Research Experiences (UCARE) program at the UNL was conceived in the fall of 1999 and accepted its first set of students in the spring of 2000. It was created to enrich the academic experience of undergraduate students at UNL and to provide tangible benefits to the research program of UNL faculty members. The assessment of this program has gone through several evolutions since its inception. The coordinator of the UCARE program, Dr. Laura Damuth, was invited to share how the program was assessed over time at the 2004 National Council for Undergraduate Research Conference.

Initially, a short questionnaire served as a "touchstone" for the coordinator of the program. The survey assisted the coordinator in keeping in contact with the students and faculty working together. Another purpose that this evaluation served was for the participants to provide feedback to the coordinator in order to identify areas in which the program could be improved.

In 2002-03, there was a noticeable increase in the participation of the non-laboratory disciplines in UCARE. To explore this aspect of participation a series of focus groups was held separately with faculty and their students to explore anecdotally the perceived benefits of the UCARE program. Of particular interest was why other faculty and students in the humanities, fine and performing arts and social sciences had become involved in UCARE. As a comparison, focus groups with science faculty and students will be asked the same questions. The results of these focus groups were shared at the 2003 AAC&U Annual conference and the 2003 Annual AAHE Assessment conference.

In 2003-04, assessment of the UCARE program moved into a new phase through development of a more detailed survey about program experiences and outcomes. Based on readings about other undergraduate research programs and based on information gleaned from the focus groups, this evaluation sought to get at more specific information about student's perception of their field/discipline; student's self-assessment of certain skills (time management, effective writing, effective speaking, critical thinking, and problem solving); interactions with their faculty sponsors, plans for their research (presentations/publications); and general questions about how their research experience impacted their undergraduate educational experiences. This survey was administered in Spring 2004 and analysis of the responses is currently underway.

H. Academic Program Review (APR) Changes

In 2002-03 a review was conducted determining how Academic Program Review (APR) self-study reports and APR Review Teams addressed the 1996 guidelines for incorporating assessment of student learning outcomes into those reviews. The result of that review suggested the intent of the guidelines needed some clarification so how evidence of student learning contributes to the APR process could evolve.

To encourage academic units to think about these guidelines in slightly different ways, several questions were developed for them to consider when preparing a self-study document for their APR visit. These questions are outlined in the document in Appendix E. This document identifies the APR guideline on which the question is based and the intent of that guideline.

To facilitate the consideration of these questions the attached document was included in the APR preparatory materials a unit receives from the Office of Academic Affairs. In addition, the University-Wide Assessment Coordinator receives a copy of the self-study report prior to the visit and has the opportunity to submit questions about assessment for the APR Review Team. The coordinator also meets with APR Review Teams during their campus visit. This change allows the institution to encourage APR Review Teams to consider the extent to which departments are using evidence of student learning in the improvement of their programs.

It is still unclear what role APR Review Teams can play in facilitating this development. For the most part, in 2003-04 the comments made by review teams were limited to suggested curriculum changes without addressing the consideration of the impact of those changes on student learning. In only one instance did a review team recommend the collection of evidence about a curricular change to evaluate the effectiveness of that change. Even with the increased attention across academe to the consideration of student learning outcomes in program improvement it is not always likely that review teams will have a member who would carefully consider the role of evidence of student learning in the review. Therefore, what needs further consideration is what types of questions can be posed to review teams that they are qualified to answer and will assist in encouraging the department to continue a process of improving their program using evidence of student learning.

I. Graduate Student Exit Surveys

The Office of Graduate Studies recently completed an effort to make available to all colleges and their graduate programs the responses to exit surveys completed by students as they prepare to graduate with a master's degree or Ph.D. This survey asks graduate students about the opportunities they had as a graduate student, satisfaction with their experience, quality of their experiences. The responses were provided at department level so that results could be used for program improvement.

IV. Conclusion

Implementation of assessment activities in the academic colleges and use of that information has remained fairly steady since 2001. Although information from reports of the academic colleges is rich, it is not comprehensive. These reports do not always capture the varied and complex ways in which evidence of student learning is a part of the understanding, discussions, and decisions about educational programs. This includes a lack of information about the context in which these activities are conducted. When considering in what context assessment occurs the questions include:

1. Has assessment of student academic achievement become formally integrated into the cycle of activities academic units routinely engage in?
2. Are academic units finding meaningful and manageable ways to collect information about the learning and educational experience of their students?
3. Are the assessment efforts of academic units being adequately guided and supported?

Although our understanding of the role that outcomes assessment does and will play at our institution has increased, establishing a cohesive relationship between outcomes assessment and improving educational programs is an on-going effort. Without this cohesive relationship assessment will be approached as an “unfunded” mandate instead of a process for reflecting and improving educational programs. The Colorado State University planning system is one possible solution in improving this cohesiveness but whatever the solution UNL needs to continue to develop its thinking and processes for assessing student learning and educational experiences so that we are consistently involved in reflecting on and improving our academic programs.

Assessment efforts at the institutional level have progressed since 2001. Consideration of learning outcomes and the collection of evidence about program effectiveness is becoming a routine part of many initiatives as evidence in reports from the Blue Sky, Transition to University Taskforce, and the Academic Senate’s proposed modification to the Comprehensive Education Program. Progress at the institutional level should be continued by encouraging the participation in assessment of programs that offer co-curricular as well as curricular activities for UNL students.

This continued progress across the institution and within academic units is important for UNL’s next accreditation visit by the HLC/NCA in 2006-07. HLC/NCA has developed new accreditation standards that will be implemented in the Fall 2005.²¹ The HLC/NCA has given three reasons for developing these new standards:

- 1) Better align accreditation criterion with the Commission’s values of innovation, inclusiveness, and learning and new statements about mission, vision, values, and strategic goals.
- 2) Transition the basis for accreditation from a focus on traditional resources to accreditation based heavily on institutional achievement and effectiveness.
- 3) Change the topic of on-site evaluation conversations to discuss fundamental institutional commitments and goals rather than audit activities allowing the visit to be of greater assistance to institutions as they evaluate their capacity to respond to significant changes in higher education.

²¹ An overview of the HLC/NCA new criteria can be found at <http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/overview/2003Overview.pdf>.

These three reasons suggest the HLC/NCA will place greater emphasis on what results from the educational process instead of what goes into that process. By thoughtfully and purposefully engaging in a process of assessing the outcomes for student and other constituents we can better understand the effectiveness of our educational programs and be better prepared to discuss that understanding with HLC/NCA.