

Report of the Assessment Oversight Committee

University of Colorado at Boulder

March 24, 2003

Michael Grant

Chair, Assessment Oversight Committee

Introduction

This report provides a three year overview and update on campus academic assessment work since the spring 2000 visit of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The principal focus of this assessment work has been on evaluating student academic accomplishments, both undergraduate and graduate; we have not included any of our extensive assessment work regarding so-called student life issues. This report, written by the Assessment Oversight Committee (AOC) has been submitted to the Chancellor, Provost and the Higher Learning Commission.

We have chosen to keep this report moderate in length by using references to more extensive material available on the campus assessment web site devoted to this topic (<http://www.colorado.edu/pba/outcomes/>). The report contains these main sections: (1) the charge to the committee from the Provost, (2) a list of initial members, (3) a presentation of the principal accomplishments to date, (4) a few sample cases, (5) an account of some of the principal difficulties faced by the campus, and (6) an enumeration and brief discussion of items next in the AOC's priority list.

Charge to the Assessment Oversight Committee January, 2001

Phil DiStefano, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

At the request of Chancellor Byyny, I am establishing a faculty and staff committee charged with providing advice, recommendations and strategies to campus administration and primary units regarding all activities associated with student assessment issues.

CU-Boulder has a long history of assessing undergraduate educational outcomes beyond standard classroom practices. In 1985, the Colorado State Legislature passed House Bill 1187, which established accountability requirements for higher education in the state. The statute required institutions to assess undergraduate student "knowledge, capacity, and skills," and to report results yearly to Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE), which in turn summarized the institutions' reports for the legislature. HB 1187 allowed institutions until fall 1989 to develop their assessment programs, with the first data to be reported for academic year 1989-90.

In response to HB 1187, CU-Boulder developed a comprehensive and continuing undergraduate assessment program. The policy governing this program was written in AY 1986-87 by a "blue ribbon" faculty and administrative committee appointed by the Chancellor, and was approved by him in March, 1988. In 1996, House Bill 1219 updated the old statute and replaced the accountability program with a system of institutional performance indicators, in particular Indicator 8, which concerns "existence and operation of a formal, comprehensive, and effective institutional assessment and

accountability program," and its subsections, which go into more specific detail. The indicators system legislation was updated again in 1999 with Senate Bill 229, with outcomes assessment remaining part of the indicator system. In addition, CCHE's policy on academic program review requires an ongoing outcomes assessment program, as does the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the accrediting body for higher education institutions in our region.

With a working assessment process in place for over 10 years, and a national reputation for leadership, why should we establish a new oversight committee?

- It's time - the assessment process has become routine, *pro forma* for many programs. It's been running on "automatic pilot," with no meetings of an oversight committee in several years.
- The expectations of external constituencies (CCHE, NCA, Governor's office, legislature, general public) have changed. For example, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), our accrediting agency, places much more emphasis on assessment now than in the '80's. NCA has specifically asked for a "progress report on the use of assessment as a tool to improve undergraduate and graduate student learning and for institutional improvement," due spring 2003. The campus must report to retain accreditation.
- Assessment of graduating seniors' knowledge and skills in the major field is one of the CCHE QIS indicators for future years, as is assessment of general education goals for lower-division undergraduates.

- In recent years students, employers, and parents have become more interested in information about what graduates of a particular program can be expected to know and do. They also expect delivery of this information via web.
- CU-Boulder is paying more attention to accountability and strategic goals in its budgeting process. The introduction of a "unit merit" component in the allocation process may allow real consequences to be attached to collection and use of assessment information.

I ask you, as an oversight committee, to build on our current efforts by re-examining extant practices, recommending new and different strategies where you think change is warranted, and providing counsel aimed at improving and enhancing the effectiveness of all our student assessment practices. While the initial emphasis will be on undergraduate education, we plan to address graduate level assessment in the near future.

Thank you in advance for contributing to this important part of our general efforts to improve academic excellence at CU-Boulder.

Initial Committee Composition:

Chair

Michael Grant, Associate Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Education, Professor and former Chair of the Department of Environmental, Population, and Organismic Biology

Members

Gordon Brown, Mathematics

Shelley Copley, Chemistry

Sam Fitch, Chair, Political Science

Stephen Jones, College of Journalism, Assistant Dean

Padraic Kenney, History

Merrill Lessley, College of Arts and Sciences, Associate Dean

Michael Main, Computer Science and Chair of the Boulder Faculty Assembly's academic affairs committee

Ronald Melicher, Business

Elese Robbins, Dean of Students and Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs

James Sherman, College of Engineering, Assistant Dean

Kumiko Takahara, East Asian Languages and Civilizations

University of Colorado Student Union student to be named

Staff

Lou McClelland, Planning, Budget, and Analysis

Perry Sailor, Planning, Budget, and Analysis

Principal Accomplishments to Date

We here list six specific accomplishments:

(1) The AOC committee has functioned as a very active, high visibility committee of senior faculty and senior staff working under the direct instructions of the Provost.

Minutes of all meetings have been posted at <http://www.colorado.edu/pba/outcomes/>.

Almost all campus units which offer courses or degrees or which provide academic

programs (for example, the Program in Writing and Rhetoric) have been directly visited by two or more members of the AOC for the purpose of discussing each unit's current assessment practices and to offer guidance, assistance and encouragement in improving, enhancing and expanding, where needed, the perception of the potential value--to that unit--of time and effort expenditures necessary for effective academic assessment. In particular, the AOC representatives focused on the written knowledge and skill goals of each unit, already written for all units and published in our catalog (<http://www.colorado.edu/sacs/catalog02-03/>) with the aim of directly connecting assessment strategies, methods, results and subsequent departmental actions to those previously articulated goals.

During these meetings, three themes emerged. First, many unit Chairs expressed significant concerns about the potential time and energy demands improved assessment activities might cause for already extremely busy faculty. Some Chairs and several faculty members feared that this was just one more top-down mandate of unimportant busywork because, after all, faculty do assess students repeatedly when they grade students (exams, papers, projects, etc.). Part of the task of the AOC representatives was to provide additional context and information on recent literature and national reports recognizing the insufficiency of course grades as an exclusive assessment method. The AOC provided some guidelines, checklists, effective examples, and bibliographic listings to the assessment liaison or, most often, to the unit Chairs to assist each unit (<http://www.colorado.edu/pba/outcomes/>). Second, several departments had invested their assessment time and energies into efforts best termed 'student satisfaction surveys'

(generally of graduating seniors) which rarely addressed academic achievement. The AOC encouraged those units to focus specifically on academic assessment and rely on other tools (e.g. the National Survey of Student Engagement and our own Senior Survey instrument) to gather information on student satisfaction. Again, we encouraged constructing assessment tools, appropriate for each department, which specifically examine the degree of success students achieve with respect to the department's own articulated knowledge and skill goals. Lastly, we found that many departments were engaged in authentic, valuable assessment activities which they did not categorize under that label and, therefore, were not adequately reporting. Several departments had made direct academic assessment of student achievement in, for example, particular knowledge areas. As a result of that work, they concluded that the students were not generally reaching the desired standard of mastery and changed their curriculum to address these perceived weaknesses.

(2) One of the main deficiencies of this campus, in the opinion of the AOC, was found in the irregular, sporadic efforts of many units to employ good assessment practices. Our campus clearly has not yet developed a strong culture of sustained assessment and one of the principal tasks of the AOC was to devise ways of providing an institutional structure and process which supports this desired goal of sustained, serious and effective assessment. To that end, the AOC committee developed a plan working with the campus Program Review Panel (PRP) officers. The Program Review Panel process constitutes the principal reflective, evaluative mechanism employed by this campus for its academic units on a regular seven year cycle. The PRP stands as a firmly established, important

and influential unit evaluation mechanism which has always included assessment as one of the articulated elements. Unfortunately, the assessment component specifically for student academic achievement within the current PRP process tended to be addressed only during the actual writing of the unit Self Study and, too often, did not result in a very effective set of strategies or results. With the aim of changing that pattern, the AOC has worked with the PRP staff to provide a much more thorough, more integrated and much more visible role for assessment in the PRP cycle. We have devised a new protocol of reporting and feedback which we think (hope!) will profoundly change the faculty's perception of the importance and value of academic assessment outside of class grades.

The central goals we hope to achieve through the implementation of this new mechanism include (a) a greater visibility and strengthened perception of the value of sound student assessment practices to all academic units such that the quality of our academic practices are improved and enhanced, (b) a newly integrated and enhanced role for student academic assessment as part of the regularly scheduled, well-established over-all unit assessment process of PRP itself, and (c) an effective, sustainable response to NCA accreditation team recommendations.

As a formal part of the integrated PRP and Assessment Oversight Committee (AOC) expectations, academic units will now prepare two types of reports on their student assessment activities and results encompassing both graduate and undergraduate students. The first type of report will be comprised of a very simple listing or enumeration of current unit assessment activities to be prepared annually for direct

submission to the Assessment Oversight Committee. These reports will be posted (as at present) on the assessment/outcomes website (<http://www.colorado.edu/pba/outcomes/>). Each unit will also be responsible for a second type of report which will be comprised of a more detailed, more thorough, presentation of their activities, results, and any changes or modifications of academic practices which resulted from their assessment activities and analyses. The AOC will review these thorough reports and offer written comments and suggestions directly back to the academic unit. Both types of unit reports will be posted on the web site but the AOC comments back to the unit regarding the thorough reports will remain as confidential communications and will not be posted. There will be two of these more thorough reports due from each unit for each seven year PRP cycle.

One of the more detailed reports will be due at the time that each unit submits its formal self-study to PRP and the other at roughly the mid-point of the PRP cycle (scheduling details below, instructions to departments in Appendix I). The unit assessment appendix (and only the assessment appendix) will be sent directly to the AOC which will then provide written comments back to the unit in a timely fashion as specified below. Both of these longer, more thorough reports, plus AOC comments on each, will be provided to the PRP Internal and External Review teams for their examination. This strategy means the AOC will only examine this specific appendix of the Self Study and thus avoid any connection with other Self Study material not directly part of the AOC's responsibilities. Both the Internal Review team and the External Review team will evaluate this student academic assessment material as an integral part of the overall PRP process.

The PRP cycle, and the process itself, is fully established, posted on the web (<http://www.colorado.edu/facultyaffairs/PRPLIST.htm>) and understood by all members of the Boulder academic community--primary units, dean's offices, Provost, etc. Integrating these specific student academic assessment components within the PRP cycle, we think, provides the most regularized, powerful and potentially most effective institutional process available.

Here is how the assessment reports would fit into a specific example of the seven year PRP cycle. The AOC will be responsible for coordinating with the AVC of Faculty Affairs to provide units with their assessment reporting schedules well in advance of due dates.

PRP year	Calendar Year	Short Report	Thorough Report
2003-2004	Feb. 1, 2004	No	Appendix to Self Study
2004-2005	Oct. 30, 2005	Yes	No
2005-2006	Oct. 30, 2006	Yes	No
2006-2007	Oct. 30, 2007	Yes	No
2007-2008	Oct 30, 2008	No	Yes
2008-2009	Oct 30, 2009	Yes	No
2009-2010	Oct. 30, 2010	Yes	No
2010-2011	Feb. 1, 2011	No	Appendix to Self Study

(3) The AOC membership has significantly improved its own level of expertise and awareness of national patterns and best practices, partly by literature review, partly by attending AAHE/NCA/HLC workshops and presentations (in Phoenix and Santa Fe this year). We have built a fairly extensive bibliography and modest library of key reference works which we make available to the units when they need them. The AOC, of course, has played and will continue to play a vital role in sustaining and improving the campus assessment activities by (a) providing guidance and assistance to unit assessment liaisons, (b) evaluating the unit assessment reports, (c) recruiting the support of senior administrative officials, (d) maintaining the regularized cycle of work described above and (e) diligently posting all of the student academic assessment work on the web site <http://www.colorado.edu/pba/outcomes/>.

(4) The AOC oversees a significant budget (\$50,000/year for the last two years) provided by the Provost and evaluates all proposals prior to approval. The AOC now requires that all units submit the required reports detailed above before receiving any outcomes assessment funding. Our experience over the last two years has been that most of the money has been spent, in descending order of magnitude, on (a) national subject matter exams, (b) travel expenses for outside consultants or evaluators, and (c) administrative costs for part time help and supplies. Some funds have been expended in support of travel to national assessment meetings for training and educational purposes.

(5) The public posting of all unit reports, coupled to the personal visits of AOC representatives, has had a significant, salutary effect in that the level of up-to-date

reporting by campus units has been improved. In addition, some units were quite pleased to find out that their information was being made available to the public for it was then perceived as a potentially attractive recruiting tool.

(6) We have made a very serious effort to strengthen graduate assessment on our campus:

History

Outcomes assessment of graduate student learning on the University of Colorado at Boulder campus takes a variety of forms. The Graduate School has taken this opportunity to review these various forms of assessment in more detail than in the past and to move in the direction of more thorough, direct and authentic assessment practices. We have made several changes, which are identified below. Since the accreditation visit, the Graduate School has thoroughly reviewed how various departments are assessing student learning, and how outcomes assessment can be used more extensively as a tool to improve graduate student learning in the future.

Beginning in the academic year 2002-2003, two members of the Graduate School staff became members of the Assessment Oversight Committee, which had previously discussed only undergraduate assessment. When issues of academic assessment are now discussed, it is in the broader contexts of both undergraduate and graduate education. This provides continuity of discussion for those issues that are relevant for both undergraduate and graduate education.

Graduate Assessment activities 2002-03

The Office of the Provost prepared and sent a letter to all departments to reinforce the campus-wide commitment to ongoing outcomes assessment indicating that visits would soon be scheduled to discuss the topic with each department. From September through December, 2002, several individuals visited every graduate department to discuss specific outcomes assessment practices in each department. These individuals included representatives from Academic Affairs (Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs), the Graduate School (the Associate Vice Chancellor for Research and Associate Dean of the Graduate School, and the Director of Research) and a senior researcher from Planning, Budget and Analysis.

The purposes of these visits were to (a) establish face-to-face relationships with the Graduate Chair and/or Graduate Director, as well as the Graduate Program Assistant who is frequently the individual collecting relevant data, (b) request graduate student learning outcomes assessment information collaboratively, rather than simply sending out a mandate to departments, (c) educate ourselves more deeply as to how graduate student learning outcomes assessment was being done department by department, (d) inform the departments that a pool of funds was available to assist them with assessment processes, and (e) indicate to departments that outcomes summaries will be expected on a yearly basis. These were valuable fact-finding meetings that provided an opportunity to develop departmental buy-in for new expectations related to assessment and documentation of graduate student learning.

What did we find when we met with departments? Not unexpectedly, departments are at various stages with regard to outcomes assessment of graduate student learning. As expected, departments have external review in the sense that they have member(s) external to the department on student master's and doctoral committees. All departments have assessment embedded within the curriculum, whether in the form of exams, required presentations, capstone projects, grant writing, portfolio or project assessments, critiqued/published papers, or other forms, but do not necessarily have these mapped specifically to an overall assessment plan. How the departments *document* outcomes assessment also varies greatly.

From a student perspective, one of the consistent tools used in the past has been the graduate student survey. The Assessment Oversight Committee and the Graduate School have agreed that this survey is superficial in the sense that it does not address deeper graduate student learning issues, and the application of this survey has been neither required nor consistently administered even within one department. Therefore, we are in the process of redesigning this survey in order to have a more informative instrument with regard to how students see their own graduate experience. We also want to track graduates out three to four years to give us both a retrospective and a longitudinal look at graduate student learning.

What was the faculty perspective? When departments were visited, there was a basic question asked of all of them: What outcomes assessment was in place, and how was this

feedback used specifically to improve graduate student learning? We were also interested in the level of students the departments recruited, how many received their graduate degree per year, how that number had changed, what kind of faculty were hired and from where, and where the students were finding positions before and shortly after graduation. Interestingly, many departments have some of this information but few departments have all of it. We have not yet developed a set of criteria for graduate student learning outcomes assessment that can be applied to all departments; indeed, we are not yet convinced that this would be a profitable strategy, given the diversity of graduate degrees on this campus.

Department results

Nearly 60% of these graduate reports have been turned in to date, and are posted on the (<http://www.colorado.edu/pba/outcomes/>). When we are asked by faculty for an example of a “model” department that is concerned with outcomes assessment and tracks it, we recommend that they look at the report from the Department of Geography. This eight-page report demonstrates a serious look at outcomes indicators and ways in which assessment can be used to improve graduate student learning.

For example, along with facts such as graduation rates and placement, they review the quality of the graduate program, noting that this department is considered by some to be in the top five in the country. (By nearly all sources, it is considered to be in the top ten nationally.) Funding sources, mentorship, the intellectual atmosphere, professional

growth opportunities, diversity of the graduate student population, academic initiatives and exit surveys are all included. When we met with the Graduate Director, he showed us a chart with alums that they were tracking ten years out. They continue to communicate with alums, integrate feedback into the graduate experience, and involve graduates in expanding departmental initiatives.

Difficulties and Problems with Assessment in General

The most consistent, most commonly encountered problem was a distinct lack of confidence by some unit Chairs with respect to the value of assessment efforts balanced against the faculty time and energy required to do them properly. Some see assessment as a high level administrative ‘fad’ which will soon go away and thus their proper response is to minimize their faculty’s investment in such work. A large part of this skepticism by Chairs likely derives from a very legitimate concern that outside forces, e.g. state legislators, have often taken it upon themselves to control or strongly influence this part of the educational process, despite having minimal experience or expertise. It is our aim to work around this source of faculty wariness by properly centering the evaluation of student learning within each academic unit wherein that unit sets the criteria, develops the instruments of assessment and determines the proper responses to the results. We have also stressed the degree to which professional accrediting agencies (e.g. the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology) and other influential entities (e.g. the National Science Foundation, the American Association for Higher Education) have converged on the view that great value lies in thoughtful student

learning assessment practices well beyond the traditional courses and grades model.

While it is clearly valuable to have experts within the discipline from outside the unit or this campus to contribute their expertise, the vast majority of effective assessment results and responses must come from the faculty within each academic unit.

The second most frequent problem attaches to the lack of continuity in responsibility for assessment activities from one year to the next and, certainly, across changes in department Chairs. Many Chairs stated they never even knew there was anything at all going on, or was supposed to be going on, in assessment in their units. The AOC committee's work in providing materials, guidance and encouragement will reduce this problem significantly as will regularizing the process within the PRP requirements.

The campus financial situation has turned significantly worse during the current fiscal year and the limited assessment funds presently available may well be significantly reduced.

Several department Chairs were quite skeptical about being able to properly encompass the wide scopes of their departments and the huge numbers of students in them. The Department of Psychology, for example, has something like 1,300 majors at any one time plus the faculty represent quite diverse specialties. The department Chair expressed considerable pessimism about the unit's ability to assess the knowledge and skill requirements of those students who followed a clinically oriented track as well as those who tended to focus on experimental psychology. In general, the largest departments

tended to have the most reservations regarding the practicality and potential success of assessment efforts.

Next Priorities for AOC

The AOC has identified four principal priorities for the next two to four years in addition to the activities already described above:

(1) The committee wants to act as a catalyst to encourage and persuade the President, the Chancellor and the Provost to include assessment topics in their general addresses to the campus, especially when addressing the faculty. We need a more visible, more strongly articulated commitment to and awareness of the value of authentic academic assessment and these leaders should play a key role in moving the campus along in this direction. We plan to initiate discussions with these officers regarding the possibility of including unit assessment in our campus' unit merit budget allocations.

(2) We need to strongly recruit each Dean's office and each unit Chair's office to become active supporters, for they function directly at the level where assessment will succeed or fail. At present, the Dean's level participation has not been strong on campus but the AOC believes that Deans should be active, effective supporters.

(3) We want to include specific assessment sections in our campus catalog, in brochures, in advertising materials and on our web site to better catch the attention of prospective students and the general public.

(4) Because we believe that some faculty have not gone beyond traditional measurements of student learning, partly due to a lack of confidence and experience with assessment of student learning, graduate and undergraduate. The Assessment Oversight Committee has discussed organizing faculty workshops where “model” departments share their criteria for excellence, and share how these have improved student learning. We believe that this workshop ‘scaffolding’ will support not only the faculty receiving it but the faculty presenting the information as well. This collaborative approach will also serve to build bridges among departments rather than having this process appear to simply be another process “mandated from the top.”

Summary

The CU Boulder campus has invested significant time and energy in strengthening its academic assessment processes and commitment since the last visit of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. We have implemented a number of sustainable procedural changes designed to encourage and support faculty assessment of student academic achievement at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. We expect to continue and enhance this assessment effort for the

foreseeable future and anticipate being able to demonstrate a substantial list of accomplishments upon the next accreditation visit in 2010.