Improvement Committee Report
February 5, 2018

1. Process summary

The Improvement Committee was charged with evaluating how assessment is used to analyze and improve the first-year experience at CU Boulder. We met regularly between mid-September and late November 2017 and subsequently worked by means of email and shared documents. We focused on three major tasks. First, we collected and finalized a set of optional multiple-choice and open-ended questions for the Foundations of Excellence (FoE) student and faculty/staff surveys. Second, we selected five initiatives affecting first-year students and investigated (a) how those initiatives are assessed and (b) whether assessment is currently used to enhance them. We discussed these findings as well as the other questions posed by the FoE for our committee. Third, we collaboratively drafted recommendations. In addition, members of the committee have worked with other Dimension committees to interpret the results of the student and faculty/staff surveys and to create avenues for more finely grained analysis.

2. Committee members

- Frances Costa, Senior Researcher, Institutional Research
- Katherine Eggert, Professor of English and Quality Initiative Leader, Office of the Provost (co-chair)
- June Gruber, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience
- Leslie Kavanaugh, Chief of Staff, Student Affairs
- Heidi Mallon, Assessment Coordinator, Offices of the Vice Provosts for Graduate Affairs and Undergraduate Education
- Beth Myers, Director of Analytics, Assessment and Accreditation, College of Engineering and Applied Science
- Rolf Norgaard, Teaching Professor, Program for Writing and Rhetoric
- Al Smith, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Affairs, Leeds School of Business
- Robert Stubbs, Director, Institutional Research (co-chair)

3. Narrative of committee opinions on each FoE question

PI 9.1. Assessment. Select the five initiatives that have the most significant impact on first-year students. To what degree does each initiative include systematic assessment?

The committee focused on five broad types of activities/practices affecting first-year students that take place, one way or another, throughout CU Boulder. This method allowed us to view the first-year experience more comprehensively than if we had chosen among the initiatives uploaded to and listed on the FoE web space for our campus, which are primarily based within separate colleges or smaller programs. We found that systematic assessment of these five activities/practices varied widely.

a. **First-Year Residential Learning Environments.** Assessments vary, with no central set of outcomes or assessment instruments. Many measures focus on satisfaction and sense of belonging, not on learning, though measures of retention rates and subsequent academic performance are available for some communities. *Residence halls* have an end-of-year survey on sense of belonging, satisfaction, and similar indicators; data may be filtered by *Residential Academic Program (RAP)* or other *Living and Learning Community (LLC)* participation. Institutional Research (IR) assesses retention and graduation rates for all new freshmen who reside in a residence hall. IR analyzed RAP students' academic performance in 2013 and 2016. *First-Year Interest Group* (FIG) students are tracked for how they are doing in subsequent semesters. *Leeds First-Year Learning Communities* are

assessed by retention rates; Leeds Signature Programs (such as the Leeds RAP) assess students' program attendance.

b. **New Student Welcome:** Re: the general Online Experience and Fall Welcome, there are multiple surveys from New Students and Families Program and Housing and Dining Services, with some overlapping outcomes and content. These surveys are not currently created or implemented in partnership between the two offices, though the directors have future plans to collaborate. The individual schools'/colleges' New Student Welcome activities vary significantly in content, from an orientation of less than one day (Arts and Sciences) to one-day or two-day new student launches (Leeds, CMCI, Engineering, Music). So far, they involve little assessment except for participation rates, though Engineering is currently evaluating their Fall 2017 program and CMCI is planning to assess its Launch Day as of Fall 2018. Beginning Fall 2017, Arts and Sciences surveyed new freshmen to assess their experiences with orientation and advising prior to starting their academic career at CU Boulder. The Office of Information Technology has included college-specific information in the Online Experience and assessed its usage (https://oit.colorado.edu/services/academic-technology/projects/new-student-welcome-experience).

c. **Small-Classroom Learning Environments:** Assessment of small-classroom learning aimed at first-year students is strong in some programs. Examples: (a) Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) first-year courses are assessed every semester with an exit survey that mirrors the NSSE Experiences with Writing Module. (b) Engineering has determined which first-year small classroom learning environments are effective (ASEN/ECEN/GEEN 1400 Engineering Projects and HUEN 1010 Humanities for Engineers). (c) CMCI surveys students in the first-year course sequence to assess student experience of the course and, in Spring 2018, will survey students who took the course in AY 2015-2016 to see what their reflections are two years later. (d) The EDUC First-Year Support Seminar was piloted in Fall 2017, and assessment plans are in process. (e) The Leeds First-Year Seminar is assessed by retention rates. (f) IR is assessing First-Year Seminar courses for their impact on retention and academic performance. However, assessment does not cover all small classes on campus that target primarily first-year students. Widespread assessment of all such courses would capture a larger number of CU students and allow the examination of differences by courses, majors, etc.

d. **Funding Initiatives:** Of all the colleges that offer scholarship support specifically for first-year students, only Engineering has done assessment of how that support correlates with subsequent student retention and academic performance.

e. **Transfer Student Initiatives:** In Fall 2016 the campus launched a biennial Transfer Student Survey to assess transfer students' perceptions of and experiences with the admission process, orientation, registration, and integration process. The Transfer Student Committee has used survey results to identify key issues affecting transfer students. In addition, some colleges (e.g., Engineering) have New Student Welcome activities directed specifically toward the curricular needs of transfer students.

PI 9.2. Use of Assessment. To what degree have assessment results been used to improve existing practices across the same five initiatives?

The committee found that the overall answer to this question is: "very little." While some of the five activities we studied do actively use assessment when revising their programs and practices, assessment is generally not much of a factor in planning changes.

a. **First-Year Residential Learning Environments** do not have a systematic and cohesive enough assessment strategy to consistently use data to improve practice across the board, though some new programs (like FIGs) will use assessment to redesign after a pilot year.
b. **New Student Welcome** overall has minimally used assessment results to drive change, although there are plans to do so moving forward in New Students and Family Programs (which has a new director working to develop an assessment plan) and in Engineering. New Student and Family Programs and the Office of Information Technology assess the New Student Welcome Online Experience for its reach and for the effectiveness of its advance personalization and reward system.
c. **Small Classroom Learning Environments** are again a brighter spot. Based on results of the exit survey, PWR has increased its attention to digital/multimedia composition and to several other areas. In Engineering, GEEN 1400 uses assessment results in real-time and at the end of each semester to improve the student experience and outcomes. In CMCI, student surveys are taken into account when revising the first-year sequence each year. EDUC plans to use assessment to revise its first-year support seminar after this year's pilot.
d. **Student Funding Initiatives:** IR assesses the effectiveness of institution-based scholarships for both undergraduate resident and nonresident students and relays that information to Financial Aid and other relevant offices.
e. **Transfer Student Initiatives:** Thus far, there seems to have been very little use of assessment results to improve transfer student initiatives, perhaps because campus-wide there are few initiatives directed specifically at transfer students.

PI 9.3. Dissemination of Data. To what degree does your institution routinely disseminate to faculty and staff the following first-year student data? (*a) Demographic characteristics; (b) Academic profile of entering students; (c) Intended majors; (d) Retention and graduation rates*

While there is strong communication in a number of areas (for example, within Engineering) and good communication of some information (for example, graduation and retention rates) campus-wide and to the public, increased campus efforts should be devoted toward synthesizing and disseminating the assessment results directly to the students as well as the campus community. We rate dissemination efforts as "medium/average" in regard to data about first-year students' demographics and academic profile, "low" in regard to data about their intended majors, and "high" in regard to students' retention and graduation rates.

PI 9.4. Understanding. To what degree have recent assessment activities improved campus understanding of the way that the following factors impact student success? (a) Student allocation of their time; (b) Student/student connections; (c) Student/faculty connections; (d) Student use of campus services; (e) Student class attendance patterns; (f) patterns of student involvement.

The campus's efforts are "low" to at best "medium/average" on all of these factors. In our view, assessment is so decentralized that it's difficult to put all the institutional data pieces together to understand the whole picture. We have evidence of achieving outcomes within specific programs and services, but when it comes to the interplay among multiple aspects of student experience, we don't have a good system.

PI 9.5. Strategies. To what degree have the following strategies been used by your campus to improve the first year? (a) Attendance at higher education meetings (e.g., conferences, institutes, workshops); (b) Participation in multi-campus initiatives focused on the first year; (c) Broad campus exposure to external experts; (d Broad exposure to campus-based knowledge/expertise about the first year.

We answered these questions based on our personal experiences as either educators of first-year students or as university staff who devote major efforts toward understanding and fostering the first-year. Our experience is that these strategies have been used on a medium to low basis at CU Boulder.

4. Sources of evidence.

In the Evidence Library:
19-25   NSSE 17 Results
26   Nonreturning UG Survey Fall 2016
35-36   Residential Academic Programs (RAPs) and Academic Success, 2013 and 2016
37   Writing Center Utilization and Academic Success, 2016
38   Engineering Honors Program Participation and Academic Success, 2016
40   Admitted Fall 2017 Transfer Student Survey
41   Admitted Fall 2017 Freshmen Cohort Survey
44   ENGR First-Year Project Class Retention
43   Fall term freshman entry cohort retention and graduation rates
60-61   Transfer Student Survey and Written Comments
69-71   Spring 2017 Residence Hall Survey
72   Spring 2017 Wise Words—Advice from Current Resident Hall Students
80   Fall 2017 Faculty/Staff Survey Results by Dimension
81   Fall 2017 Faculty/Staff Survey Results
86   The Relationship between Taking a Writing Course and Academic Success in the Freshman Year
101   New Student Survey

Additional:
- OIT description of New Student Welcome assessment (https://oit.colorado.edu/services/academic-technology/projects/new-student-welcome-experience)
- RAP Task Force Report

5. Committee recommendations.

Assessment is usually seen as onerous, exceedingly technical, and punitive. Our recommendations are designed to help CU Boulder normalize and value assessment, and to help create a culture where assessment is ongoing, and where even modest assessment initiatives can play a role. *These recommendations are in priority order.*

1. **Establish learning outcomes.** Develop campus-wide learning and process outcomes and possibly also a mission statement for the first-year experience. Different programs and interventions will help achieve them in different ways, but if we are to have a cohesive and assessable experience, we must come to agreement about the core elements we are trying to achieve. There is

extensive research in the student affairs world on what these outcomes should be: start from the existing literature and customize for our campus. Assessment initiatives should follow learning outcomes and should be premised on the following questions:

- Why? What is the purpose of assessment? For example, is it formative or summative?
- What? What are the intended outcomes of assessment? What is the intended target (unit or level) of assessment? Are we looking at institution-centered outcomes or student-centered outcomes?
- When? At what times in the college experience should assessment be conducted?
- Who? Who will be the assessor(s)? A central office can be best because it has no investment in the outcomes. From whom will assessment data be collected?
- Where? Where will assessment data be found? In what locales will data be collected?
- How? How will assessment data be analyzed and summarized? What research designs and methodologies will be employed? What evidence is direct evidence of learning, and what is indirect? We need to have both, but we should be moving as a campus toward using direct measures of learning outcomes as much as possible, not relying so heavily on student self-reported learning and satisfaction measures.

2. **Coordinate assessment.** Establish, fully fund, and support a system/clearinghouse in which effective assessment practices can be consolidated and applied to all programs for first-year students. This system/clearinghouse should coordinate efforts among Student Life, academic units, the Office of Data Analysis, and the Provost's Office. Campus silos mitigate against effective sharing of assessment efforts: unit-level assessment tends to get lost, and doesn't see the audience it deserves; ditto with divisional/college-level assessment. This initial endeavor will require a reasonable amount of time to set up as well as solid commitment from higher administration to support, manage, and maintain it.

3. **Make assessment matter.** Build assessment into reviews of programs targeting first-year students (FoE implementation, ARPAC review, etc.) and into subsequent decision-making, including our processes, meeting agendas, schedules, operations. This would show the value of good assessment in strategic decision-making.

4. **Use data to coordinate campus initiatives.** Put all the institutional data pieces together to understand the whole picture and the interplay among multiple aspects of student experience. Use current campus initiatives (HLC accreditation/Quality Initiative, Academic Futures, FoE implementation, etc.) as well as regular program reviews as resources and engines to create this holistic view and concrete, actionable plans.

5. **Communicate assessment findings and uses.** Communicate the results of assessment regularly to the campus community and the public. What is working in regard to the first-year experience? What are we trying to improve, and how? Outreach efforts should be aimed at effectively disseminating the assessment data back to the faculty, to the staff involved in academic programs, and to the students themselves. This could be done in the form of campus email lists getting a monthly "digest" of assessment activities from ODA and other assessment professionals on campus, but it could also include targeted presentations to faculty and department groups, residence halls, student interest groups, etc. This would have a multi-prong benefit:

- Faculty, staff, and students will be aware of the data
- Faculty, staff, and students can engage with the data and provide immediate feedback not captured in the result summary alone
- Faculty, staff, and students will feel understood and that their opinions are taken seriously
- Faculty, staff, and students may be more motivated to engage in future assessment opportunities