

REPORT
American Association of Colleges and Universities
General Education Assessment Conference
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1. Summary. The current movement toward effective assessment of general education is part of a larger initiative on the part of accrediting agencies to use the accreditation process to scrutinize colleges and universities more closely than in the past. The accrediting agencies are in turn being driven by increasing interest at the Federal level in assessment of U.S. education in general. This interest has recently been most visibly directed toward K-12 education (for example, the No Child Left Behind legislation). However, Congress has begun turning its attention to higher education. Over the past few years several bills have been introduced in the US Senate and House of Representatives to expand scrutiny to the baccalaureate level, and several important legislators, including Senator Edward Kennedy, have become interested and involved. (For an example from the current Congress, go to thomas.loc.gov and search for HR 838; be sure to read the “Findings and Purposes” section.) None of the bills has yet been approved or even made it to the floor, but their existence has alerted accrediting agencies that this is an issue in need of attention. (Note: AACU is not an accrediting agency, it is an association of colleges and universities that are subject to accreditation.)

There is widespread concern in the higher education community that if colleges and universities do not police themselves, undesirable -- even draconian -- measures may be imposed. In the words of the closing plenary speaker, this could lead colleges and universities to “an examined life not worth living.” The speaker’s opinion was that higher education has a maximum of five years to demonstrate that it has instituted effective institutional assessment and responses. Accrediting agencies are working to help institutions respond to this challenge, but the pressure from the Federal level is real and will continue.

At the conference, representatives from institutions farther along in the assessment process than CWU is noted numerous challenges, but pointed out numerous benefits far beyond satisfying accrediting agencies. Many noted some benefits have been missed because assessment has been seen as being imposed from outside. As a result, it was and is difficult to interest faculty in participating, and assessment and response to assessment have often not been pursued earnestly. Numerous institutions that have had accreditation suspended were represented, and by all accounts the loss of accreditation can very effectively focus institutional attention on assessment. Still, even in such dire circumstances there remain skeptics and those unwilling to change.

CWU’s assessment situation is much better than that of many institutions, and worse than others. Likewise, CWU’s general education program is more well designed than some,

but there were numerous presentations describing exemplary programs. It is clear that these exemplary programs will set the standard by which others will be judged in the 21st century.

By understanding the direction in which general education, accreditation, and assessment issues are headed, CWU should be able to change from a reactive to a proactive approach to these issues. Effective assessment and communication of improvements in student learning should be useful recruitment tools to attract better students and faculty as other institutions are increasingly called to document their progress but are unable to do so as effectively as CWU. If CWU can move quickly enough (say, over a few years), we can become a regional leader in the transition to effective 21st century education. The transition is inevitable. We can choose to lead or to follow.

Although CWU's general education program seems adequate at this time (that is, it is no worse than many programs, and is better than others), it will clearly soon be outdated, as other institutions will continue to innovate even if we don't do so. Some institutions with widely admired general education programs appear to include University of North Carolina at Asheville, University of California at Monterey Bay, Portland State University, and Alverna College. The most cutting-edge program in the U.S. is probably currently the University Studies program at Portland State University. The Director of this program told us that the program was designed and implemented in 18 months, beginning after the Provost posed this question to the Faculty Senate about eleven years ago: "Can you state with conviction that these [general education distribution] requirements are meaningful?" The PSU program is celebrating its 10th year in operation this year. The opening plenary speaker at this conference was President of PSU during the design and implementation process, and is now Assistant Director of the Division of Undergraduate Education at NSF; she was chair of the committee that wrote *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. The University Studies program has made PSU nationally known and respected for its leadership.

2. **Nationwide Lessons: Implications for CWU.**

- A. Substantial work is required to do the job well. Most institutions that currently demonstrate a determined effort at assessment are at imminent risk of losing, or have lost, accreditation. Significant additional resources will likely be necessary at CWU. CWU should consider offering additional pay to faculty who work on the design and implementation phases of the transition process. See also Section 3.C.
- B. Faculty resistance and lack of enthusiasm is common even at institutions with at-risk accreditation. A clear delineation and separation between assessment and accountability must be established and respected, along with other measures aimed at minimizing any perceived threats to faculty or departments at CWU. Assessment does not and should not represent threats to individuals or departments. It should be seen as an opportunity for faculty development and learning. The results can be expected to provide a sense of satisfaction as we become confident that our students are learning what they need to know.

- C. Nationally, faculty are typically at least partly unaware of the mission, goals, and importance of general education. Additional education of faculty may be necessary at CWU.
- D. Pedagogical techniques at most institutions significantly lag behind the research results of cognitive psychology regarding effective instruction. Significant faculty development in this area is necessary at CWU. The paper by Halpern and Hakel (*Changes*, July/August 2003, pp 36-41; a copy should accompany this report if it is distributed) is very informative in this regard and should be widely distributed and used in faculty development. National leaders can and should be brought in to provide faculty development.
- E. Attrition of student and faculty members on assessment and other committees can be a significant problem. CWU students should be offered credit for their work on key committees at CWU.

3. Key CWU-Specific Problems.

- A. Current SEOI practices and the use of results in personnel actions represent strong disincentives for faculty to use evidence-based best educational practices.
- B. Real outcomes assessment must be used much more widely. Exams and other assignments used for grading students are not the same thing as outcomes assessment. Outcomes assessment is more deliberate and time-consuming, and need not examine every student's progress. It is aimed at assessing the effectiveness of programs, not individual courses or students.
- C. The current faculty rewards structure does not encourage faculty to participate in the necessary work, and will not be able to support permanent sustainability of efforts and changes. The changes and pressures developing nationally will be felt for a long time. The Boyer model or something very like it must be adopted across the university. This was essentially considered to be a given at the conference. Adopting the Boyer model or a similar model will require a cultural change that has already been suggested by a prior administration. The current administration should reaffirm and clearly support the earlier initiative. Merit criteria and performance-based budgeting may also need to be updated. If the university doesn't demonstrate its support for rewarding faculty for doing the work the university needs to have done, the university will have to acknowledge, if only to itself, that there will be no real change in the education of its students. Ethically, the university should probably advertise this fact to prospective students, as many other universities are making significant progress toward more effective programs and assessment.

4. Assets: Current CWU GE and Assessment.

- A. UNIV 101 is an existing, entry-level, required course that enrolls 24 students/section. This course could be used much more effectively than it is

- currently being used to introduce GE goals, administer pre-tests and collect writing samples and other data for assessment. Faculty development to help with presentation of an updated UNIV 101 course would reach many faculty, thus leveraging the faculty development so that it reached faculty across the university.
- B. We have and are in contact with a core group of interested and committed GE faculty.
 - C. The administration has indicated support for and has provided and promised resources for continued improvement of both the GE program and effective assessment programs.
 - D. State accountability expectations are providing outside motivation for continued improvement.
 - E. The financial status of university currently stable.
 - F. Faculty morale is reasonably good and is improving.
 - G. Faculty attitudes toward GE are favorable and improving.
 - H. The upcoming accreditation revisitation process provides additional opportunities and incentives for near-term changes and documentation of progress to date.

5. CWU Issues in Need of Early Action, and Thoughts on Approaches

- A. We must align SEOIs with best teaching/learning practices. This is actually rather urgent. Current SEOI instrument and the current use of SEOI data in promotion and tenure *discourages* use of best practices and even rewards the use of practices known to be ineffective. Luckily, SEOI revision is currently in process, so the timing might be favorable for addressing this problem.
- B. We must engage a significant number of faculty in discussing, planning, and participating in outcomes assessment. Faculty need to be included to a greater extent in the accreditation process. Current faculty involvement appears to be limited to preparing reports with no real understanding of the changes taking place in the accreditation industry and their changing demands on colleges and universities.
- C. Performance-based budgeting may be a good way to encourage departments and programs to participate in real outcomes assessment and responses to assessment results, but it seems unlikely that the current criteria will have the desired effect with respect to outcomes assessment. This, along with the points made in Section 3.C, needs attention in order to influence faculty, department, and program values.
- D. Student members of Faculty Senate and university committees should be offered credit for their service – this would help reduce student attrition on university committees. Students would probably be most encouraged and engaged if they

got credit for a 300-level course, perhaps in UNIV. Engaged and effective student work would certainly be worthy of 300-level credit.

Conclusion and Future Directions. The AACU Long Beach General Education Assessment Conference instilled new understanding of the reasons and urgency behind recent changes in accreditation scrutiny and the need for assessment. Ironically, we're being pressed to do what we should have been doing all along. Institutions – or, more specifically, students at institutions -- that focus exclusively on merely satisfying accreditation organizations will not realize the full benefits that true assessment of student learning can bring to programs and faculty.

Several immediate changes seem necessary in light of information from the conference. These are listed in Section 5, and should be seriously considered as soon as possible.

It seems that the CWU administration has been “protecting” CWU faculty from the challenges and joys of assessment. While this is understandable, faculty should be brought into the process more directly. The involvement of faculty in program assessment should continue to expand, with the goal of improving all our programs so that they are demonstrably better than those at sister institutions. CWU should then publicize these facts, which will have the effect of drawing the best students to our programs. The effects of these changes will benefit everyone in the CWU community.

This report greatly benefited from conversations with Chenyang Li, who also attended the conference.