

STUDENT OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT POLICY
University of Northern Iowa
April, 1991

This report details an institutional policy which will guide the assessment of student outcomes at the University of Northern Iowa. This policy has been developed as the result of action taken by the Iowa Board of Regents in December, 1990, and has been prepared in accordance with principles established by the action of the Board.

This policy statement consists of three parts:

- ❖ Nature and purposes of outcomes assessment
- ❖ Guiding principles of outcomes assessment
- ❖ Procedural guidelines for outcomes assessment

NATURE AND PURPOSES OF OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

Student outcomes assessment is a process by which evidence of the congruence between an institution's stated mission, goals and objectives, and the actual outcomes of its academic programs and co-curricular activities, is assembled and analyzed in order to improve teaching and learning and enhance goal congruence. Although outcomes assessment is a critical element of the institutional growth and change, it is not an end in itself. Rather, it is one of many vehicles which may help an institution effect change. At the University of Northern Iowa we see four basic purposes for implementing a student outcomes assessment program.

- ❖ Outcomes assessment is an instrument of quality assurance, providing data that can be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- ❖ Through its role in program review and strategic planning, outcomes assessment promotes the rational, orderly evolution and improvement of the institution and its programs.
- ❖ Outcomes assessment provides a basis for faculty cooperation, improved integration within and among courses and programs, and supports the development of interdisciplinary courses and programs.
- ❖ Outcomes assessment helps to make the institution more responsive to its primary constituencies including: students, parents, accrediting bodies, potential employers, various public agencies, and others. This external purpose supports needs for resources and claims of excellence.

Through these functions student outcomes assessment helps the institution focus on the need to answer the following fundamental questions:

- What should students learn?
- How well are they learning it?
- How does the institution know?

Whatever purposes outcomes assessment may serve, there is one purpose it should not serve. It is not the intent of outcomes assessment to produce data by which institutions or programs are compared and/or ranked.

Student outcomes assessment is a goal-directed process. Through the data collected the process permits the adjustment of activities in relation to a number of goals grouped in the following hierarchy.

- ❖ Institutional Goals
 - Common to many institutions
 - Specific to a particular institution

- ❖ Program Goals
 - Content related and program-specific
 - Skill related and program-specific
 - Related to general education

- ❖ Course Goals
 - Content related and discipline-specific
 - Skill related and discipline-specific

Because it related to numerous goals, outcomes assessment plays a broad role in the institutional planning process. As shown in Figure 1 (page 8), student outcomes assessment is a primary element of the overall institutional and environmental assessment. These assessments are, in turn, a primary input to the overall strategic planning process.

Although the assessment of student outcomes is commonly directed to outcomes in academic programs, the educational experience involves more than just courses. Student advising, extracurricular activities, and other co-curricular programs enrich and expand the student experience. Therefore, the process of outcomes assessment includes both program and co-curricular elements as Figure 3 (page 9) illustrates. The figure also provides additional insight into the role of outcomes assessment in the planning process.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

The process of assessing student outcomes at the University of Northern Iowa will be guided by a number of important principles. The NASULGC principles have been adopted by the Board of Regents and will apply to all three institutions. Additional principles have been suggested by the Board Office in correspondence to those involved in setting institutional policy. The remaining principles have been gathered from a variety of sources and are intended to apply to assessment at UNI.

NASULGC PRINCIPLES

1. Institutional, program, and student outcomes assessment should focus, primarily, on the effectiveness of academic programs and on the improvement of student learning and performance. [This principle has been expanded in the process described by Figure 3.]
2. States and institutions should rely primarily on incentives rather than regulations of penalties to affect student outcomes assessment and foster improvement.
3. Institutional programs for evaluation and assessment should be developed in collaboration with the faculty.
4. Assessment requirements should permit colleges and universities to develop institutional programs and define indicators of quality appropriate to their missions and goals and consistent with state-wide objectives and standards.
5. Colleges and universities should be encouraged to use multiple methods of assessment for improving teaching and learning and demonstrating achievement. [This is especially critical given the goal hierarchy described above.]

6. Requirements for assessment should be fiscally conservative and avoid imposing costly evaluation programs on institutions or state agencies.
7. Within an institution, assessment programs should be linked to strategic planning or program review, or some comprehensive strategy intended to encourage change and improvement. [See Figures 1 and 3.]

ADDITIONAL PRINCIPLES

- ❖ Assessment should involve both major programs and the General Education program on a regular basis.
- ❖ The focus for process development is on the department unit.
- ❖ Assessment is not necessarily student specific, although in many cases it may be. In any case, the development of an effective outcomes assessment program depends on student involvement.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND ASSUMPTIONS

- ❖ Although teaching is a major element of assessment, student learning remains the primary responsibility of the student.
- ❖ Campus climate is critical to effective teaching and learning.
- ❖ There are two sets of skills and competencies that students must learn, a minimum set and an additional set of desired skills which enable the student to strive for excellence. Assessment must accumulate data not only on these minimum basic outcomes, but must also measure the degree to which programs impart the skills required for excellence.
- ❖ For assessment to succeed students must: see the value of the process, participate sincerely, and believe that the process will result in improvements.
- ❖ Data collected through assessment should be governed by recognized codes of ethics relating to human subjects research.
- ❖ Outcomes assessment requires resources, especially when faculty time and effort are required.
- ❖ Faculty will not participate effectively and outcomes assessment is unlikely to be successful if faculty suspect that assessment results will be incorporated in the faculty reward structure. However, faculty must be rewarded for their [service] work on the assessment process.
- ❖ A major purpose of outcomes assessment is to build habits of inquiry and a culture of evidence about student learning.
- ❖ Successful assessment requires leadership and support throughout the university, as well as integrity and accountability from those administering the program.
- ❖ The assessment program itself must be evaluated periodically.
- ❖ Outcomes assessment may be based on either a census or a sample of students.
- ❖ Interdisciplinary programs such as general education, the business core, and the professional sequence in education will be assessed by committees involving faculty from the affected

departments.

PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES FOR OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

The implementation of student outcomes assessment at the University of Northern Iowa will consist of three steps.

- ❖ Establish a university and departmental committee structure to develop assessment plans and supervise the process of collecting and analyzing outcomes data.
- ❖ Departmental and interdisciplinary program committees must establish assessment plans for each program in the University. These plans should contain five parts:
 - Assessment philosophy and program goals
 - Student outcomes and competencies
 - Frequency of assessments
 - Assessment methods
 - Methods of evaluating and interpreting results
- ❖ Results of the initial assessment process will be used to further refine the process and begin making appropriate program adjustments.

COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

Implementation of the student outcomes assessment process will be initially supervised by a University Student Outcomes Assessment Committee. In addition, full implementation will probably require the appointment of an Outcomes Assessment Coordinator within the central administration. This person would be an ex-officio member of the committee. The Assessment Committee will be initially responsible for coordinating the process of developing assessment plans and evaluating their consistency with this policy statement and the Strategic Plan. The committee will also serve as a resource for the departmental committees and continue to communicate with its counterparts at the other Regents Universities. This committee will also be involved in supervising the trial semester (Spring, 1992) and first full year of the process (1992-93). The suggested composition for this committee is included as Table 1 (page 11).

Departmental committees are to be established in Spring, 1991, to have a faculty chair, and to have 3-5 members. The departmental assessment plans must be approved by the faculty of the department. These departmental committees are required to submit their proposed assessment plans to the University Committee prior to the completion of the Fall Semester, 1991. These department plans will be used to compose a Progress Report to the Board Office in December, 1991.

DEVISING GOALS, OUTCOMES, AND COMPETENCIES

Student outcomes must be related to the hierarchy of goals listed previously. University goals are the most general and may be derived from the current University Strategic Plan and the various college plans. These goals will generally reflect the departmental philosophy referred to above.

Program and course goals should also be consistent with strategic plan goals, although specific program goals will be established by the departments. Program goals include both content and skill-related elements. From these goals departments will develop program-based outcomes, or subgoals, and related skills and competencies are specific constituents of the broader outcomes to be achieved. For example:

- ❖ Establish broadly based, transcourse and transmajor goals (goals and objectives beyond

course objectives).

- ❖ List the major outcomes associated with these broad goals.
- ❖ For each outcome list the primary competencies identified as being needed to reach that outcome. These competencies identified as being needed to reach that outcome. These competencies should be more concrete than the outcomes.
 - Define the general competencies of the college educated person: (i.e. expressing knowledge, understanding, and ability to interpret world events based on theoretical and philosophical foundations.)
 - Foundation or basic knowledge or skill (i.e. proficiency in writing, algebra, reading, and speaking).
 - Discipline-specific competencies: those understandings and abilities which are characteristic of a student in a particular field of study.

The relationship between the departmental philosophy, goals, outcomes, and competencies is also described in Figure 2 on page 8.

TIMING OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The structure of the programs and the hierarchy of goals addressed by outcomes assessment requires that the process be repeated at several stages in the student "life cycle." As Figure 4 (page 10) illustrates, there are five basic stages where assessment occurs. The primary responsibility for each stage is also assigned.

- ❖ Admission to the University -- Primary responsibility: university.
This stage provides pre-enrollment baseline data. A key ingredient to student outcomes is what students bring to the university.
- ❖ Declaration of Major -- Primary responsibility: departments.
This level of assessment provides input data for students entering major programs.
- ❖ Mid-program -- Primary responsibility: departments.
This level of assessment is aimed primarily at assessing progress in the major program, although it may also provide information for use in assessing the General Education program.
- ❖ Program Completion -- Primary responsibility: departments.
This stage measures student outcomes at the completion of the major and may also include some late General Education program elements.
- ❖ Post-graduation -- Primary responsibility: university, departments cooperating.
The final stage of outcomes assessment measures the long-term effect of the educational experience.

Each assessment can occur at its own schedule with reference to the calendar; however, at least some of the assessments must occur each academic year. Some institutions cancel classes and utilize an "assessment day" to perform their assessments. Such a practice would be up to individual departments at UNI.

METHODS OF ASSESSMENT FOR OUTCOMES AND COMPETENCIES

This section identifies possible method(s) by which the outcomes and competencies will be assessed. These methods may range from the formal to the informal, but must be precise and identifiable. All students may be assessed on a sample of outcomes and/or a sample of students may be assessed on all outcomes. Suggested methods of assessment include:

- ❖ Admission to the university and/or declaration of major
 - Transcript (high school, transfer, UNI)
 - GPA (high school, transfer, UNI)
 - High school rank
 - Scores, profile reports and class analysis
 - American Council on Education's College and University Environment and Experience assessment (Astin's study)
 - Other

- ❖ Declaration of major, mid-program, and/or program completion
 - Portfolios
 - Interviews
 - Self-assessments by students
 - Performance recital/exhibit/research
 - Practicum/intern/work experience
 - Comprehensive examination (written or oral)
 - Senior project or thesis
 - Testing (standardized or unstandardized/commercial or locally developed)
 - Coordinate efforts with general education committee to assess capstone course outcomes
 - Retention study
 - Other

- ❖ Post-graduation
 - Regents retention study
 - Alumni relations survey
 - University alumni council
 - Employer survey
 - Interviews with alumni
 - Graduate school entrance examinations--GRE, NTE, LSAT, GMAT, etc. scores and analysis
 - Professional licensing examination
 - Other

ANALYSIS-INTERPRETATION AND REPORTING OF RESULTS

The last step in the assessment process will be the collection, interpretation and evaluation of results. Each department will be required to devise an outcomes assessment report structure for each program it must assess. The form of these reports is up to the individual departments. However, these reports will be reviewed by the University Assessment Committee and/or the Coordinator and the committee reserves the right to consult with the departments to ensure the most useful presentation of results. Detailed procedures for this part of the program will evolve as the trial semester results are collected. After the initial trial semester it is anticipated that results will be reported to the college deans and the Office of the Provost either annually or biannually beginning in Spring, 1993.