

UNIVERSITY-WIDE ASSESSMENT

1999 ANNUAL REPORT

University of Nebraska – Lincoln

September, 2000

University-wide Assessment Steering Committee, 1999-2000

Michael Anderson, Teaching and Learning Center

Maurice Baker, College of Agricultural Sciences & Natural Resources

John Ballard, College of Engineering and Technology

Robert Bergstrom, Comprehensive Education Program Assessment Coordinator

Robert Fought, College of Fine and Performing Arts

Fayrene Hamouz, College of Human Resources and Family Sciences

Earl Hawkey, Student Affairs

Jessica Jonson, University-wide Assessment Coordinator

Sharon Kuska, College of Architecture

Suzanne Ortega, Graduate Studies

George Pfeiffer, University Curriculum Committee

Nancy Rapoport, College of Law

Linda Shipley, College of Journalism and Mass Communications

Nancy Stara (chair), VCAA

William Walstad, College of Business Administration

James Walter, Teachers College

Laura White, College of Arts and Sciences

The *UNL Assessment Plan* (1996) indicates that University-wide Assessment Steering Committee, in conjunction with the University-wide Assessment Coordinator, is to prepare an annual report providing an overview of student academic achievement during the academic year (pp. 27-28).

**UNIVERSITY-WIDE ASSESSMENT
1999 ANNUAL REPORT
September, 2000**

Executive Summary

The University-wide Assessment Steering Committee was created to “facilitate feedback and coordination among and between the various aspects of assessment”.¹ It has been instrumental in the evolution of assessment on our campus. As each unit has carried out its responsibility to assess the student learning outcomes that the unit values, the University-wide Assessment Committee continued its responsibility to serve UNL in an advisory capacity.

During the 1999-2000 academic year, many units have made tremendous strides in identifying what learning should be occurring, the mechanisms for measuring that learning, and using evidence collected for programmatic improvement. However, it is still true that progress differs across different units. Some units have found their assessment evidence useful for reflection about the program while in others the process continues to evolve. This differential progress is acceptable and logical given that outcomes assessment is viewed as an ongoing rather than an episodic process that examines teaching and learning over time in the spirit of continuous improvement.

During the 1999-2000 academic year, the committee, with the assistance of the University-wide Assessment Coordinator, has continued to oversee or conduct the following activities:

Activity 1: Integrate outcomes assessment into UNL’s program planning/budgeting process.

Activity 2: Facilitate the annual reporting of college, departmental, and program assessment activities.

Activity 3: Initiate and monitor, where appropriate, the assessment of graduate student learning outcomes.

Activity 4: Track assessment of the Comprehensive Education Program.

Activity 5: Communicate useful assessment information to university faculty and administration.

Activity 6: Plan for a focus visit by North Central Association (NCA) on the progress of outcomes assessment at UNL.

¹ *The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Assessment Plan*, Fall 1996 (submitted as part of the North Central Association Accreditation Process), p. 27.

The general recommendations emerging from this report for guiding actions during the 2000-01 academic year are:

Recommendation 1: Continue to monitor the integration of outcomes assessment evidence into UNL's program planning/budgeting process which includes Academic Program Review and External Accreditation that is discipline-specific;

Recommendation 2: Consider the results of faculty conversations centered around CEP with the Peer Review of Teaching and Assessment Project;

Recommendation 3: Continue to facilitate the development and annual reporting of college, departmental, and program assessment activities;

Recommendation 4: Support efforts to plan and implement assessment of graduate student learning outcomes;

Recommendation 5: Communicate the benefits and share the successes of engaging in an effective assessment process;

Table of Contents

University-Wide Assessment Report September, 2000

Introduction	1
University-wide Assessment Committee Activities	3
Activity 1: Integrate outcomes assessment into UNL's program planning and budgeting process	3
A. Academic Program Review	3
<i>Self-Study Documents</i>	3
<i>Review Team Reports</i>	5
B. External Accreditation	5
C. Mid-Cycle Assessment Reviews	6
<i>Purpose 1: Reflection and Suggestions</i>	6
<i>Purpose 2: Communication</i>	7
<i>Conclusion</i>	9
Activity 2: Facilitate the annual reporting of college, departmental, and program assessment	9
Activity 3: Initiate and monitor assessment of graduate student learning outcomes	11
Activity 4: Monitor assessment of the Comprehensive Education Program (CEP)	11
A. Institution Wide Surveys	12
B. Peer Review of Teaching and Assessment Project	12
Activity 5: Communicate useful assessment information to university faculty and administration	14
A. Website	14
B. University-Wide Assessment Steering Committee	14
C. Mid-Cycle Assessment Reviews	14
D. Teaching and Learning Center	14
Activity 6: Plan for the focus visit by North Central Association (NCA)	15
Conclusions and Recommendations	16
Appendices	
Appendix A – Common Misperceptions about the Outcomes Assessment Process	
Appendix B – Copy of Dean's letter requesting Annual Assessment Reports	
Appendix C – Effects of the assessment of undergraduate outcomes	
Appendix D - Effects of the assessment of graduate outcomes	
Appendix E - Annual CEP Assessment report	
Appendix F - Reaccreditation Letter from North Central Association	

Introduction

The University-wide Assessment Steering Committee was created to “facilitate feedback and coordination among and between the various aspects of assessment”.¹ It has been instrumental in the evolution of assessment on our campus. As each unit has carried out its responsibility to assess the student learning outcomes that the unit values, the University-wide Assessment Committee continued its responsibility to serve UNL in an advisory capacity.

During the 1999-2000 academic year, many units have made tremendous strides in identifying what learning should be occurring, the mechanisms for measuring that learning, and using evidence collected for programmatic improvement. However, it is still true that progress differs across different units. Some units have found their assessment evidence useful for reflection about the program while in others the process continues to evolve. This differential progress is acceptable and logical given that outcomes assessment is viewed as an ongoing rather than an episodic process that examines teaching and learning over time in the spirit of continuous improvement.

During the 1999-2000 academic year, the committee, with the assistance of the University-wide Assessment Coordinator, has continued to oversee or conduct the following activities:

Activity 1: Integrate outcomes assessment into UNL’s program planning/budgeting process.

Activity 2: Facilitate the annual reporting of college, departmental, and program assessment activities.

Activity 3: Initiate and monitor, where appropriate, the assessment of graduate student learning outcomes.

Activity 4: Track assessment of the Comprehensive Education Program.

Activity 5: Communicate useful assessment information to university faculty and administration.

Activity 6: Plan for a focus visit by North Central Association (NCA) on the progress of outcomes assessment at UNL.

The purpose of this University-wide Annual Assessment report is to summarize the results and conclusions of activities conducted by the individual units and overseen by the University-Wide Assessment Committee. This summary and reflection will serve as a focus for determining the future direction of outcomes assessment at UNL.

¹ *The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Assessment Plan*, Fall 1996 (submitted as part of the North Central Association Accreditation Process), p. 27.

It is necessary to clarify the currency of information contained in this report because of the cycle used for colleges and departments to report on their annual assessment activities. The effects of outcomes assessment activities discussed under Activity 2 (Annual Reporting) and Activity 4 (Graduate Assessment) and reported in Appendix C (Effects of the assessment of undergraduate outcomes) and Appendix D (Effects of the assessment of graduate outcomes) are based on activities conducted by individual units during the 1998-99 academic year and reported during the Fall of 1999. Remaining information discussed in this report is based on activities overseen by the University-Wide Assessment Committee during the 1999-2000 academic year.

University-wide Assessment Committee Activities

Activity 1: Integrate outcomes assessment into UNL's program planning and budgeting process

Academic Program Reviews (APR), External Accreditation's, and Mid-Cycle Assessment Reviews are three processes used to integrate assessment into UNL's program planning and budgeting. The functioning of each process during the 1999-2000 academic year is discussed below.

A. Academic Program Reviews

Academic Program Reviews (APR) are intended to insure the quality of academic programming, both instructional and non-instructional.¹ The review team is to consider the environment at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln in addition to evaluating the program quality.² In fall 1996 academic program review procedures were changed to incorporate assessment activities; however, the first self-study reports to include this information were filed in spring 1997. This delay allowed programs to implement assessment plans designed during the 1995-96 academic year. The extent to which programs and review teams incorporate outcomes assessment activities and evidence into their reports is surveyed each year. This year self-study documents and team reports for five Academic Program Reviews conducted in the 1999-2000 academic year indicate a marked improvement in the extent and quality to which assessment information is included in the process.³ The following is a description of how assessment activities and evidence were incorporated into self-study documents and review team reports.

Self-Study Documents

A significant step towards fully integrating assessment information into the APR process occurred in 1999-2000. Self-study documents submitted in 1999-2000 focused more on student learning issues when discussing the strengths and areas in need of improvement. In addition, self-study documents contained an increased awareness and recognition of the role of outcomes assessment in discussing programmatic improvement. Self-study documents from 1997-98 and 1998-99 typically included only a description of the program's learning objectives, assessment methods and procedures, and sometimes a commentary on the implementation of their assessment activities and the perceived usefulness of these efforts. Frequently this information was included in an appendix instead of incorporating it into the self-study document.

¹ *Academic Program Review Guidelines*, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Fall 1996, p. 1

² *Id.*, p. 2

³ Note that four of the five Academic Program Review documents surveyed came from the Arts and Sciences College.

The above conclusion that outcomes assessment activities and evidence is beginning to play a greater role in the APR process is supported by the following themes found in this year's documents:

- ⇒ Summaries of assessment evidence either in text or table form were frequently included in the self-study document.
- ⇒ An increase in the use of assessment evidence (particularly from senior and alumni surveys) in the identification of programmatic strengths and areas of improvement.
- ⇒ More discussions focused on graduate assessment activities and evidence.
- ⇒ All reports identified programmatic and curricular issues related to student learning.
- ⇒ Outcomes assessment activities and evidence accompanied discussions about the teaching mission of the program.

In addition to these themes, two of the five self-studies incorporated assessment activities and evidence even further:

- ⇒ Assessment evidence was clearly linked to the identification of learning issues and solutions.
- ⇒ Discussed activities conducted or to be conducted that would follow-up on programmatic changes intended to improved student learning.
- ⇒ Included a detailed description of the timeline for assessment, audiences for assessment, structure of the assessment process (i.e. methods, administration, responsibility, etc.), and how results are analyzed and used.

These two self-studies illustrated how assessment evidence can be meaningfully incorporated into the APR process. Their approaches highlight several ways that the use of assessment evidence in self-studies can be strengthened.

- ⇒ Outcomes assessment evidence should not only be presented but also reflected upon. A discussion of possible solutions or what the results may mean should accompany the presentation. Assessment evidence should be used to determine how to improve the department's programs in the next five years.
- ⇒ Multiple sources of assessment evidence should be used to reach conclusions about programmatic strengths and areas of improvement. The assessment evidence referenced in self-study documents mainly came from indirect measures (i.e. student and alumni surveys). In the future, programs should determine how data from indirect *and direct* measurements can be combined for stronger evidence of program effectiveness or need for improvement.

The use of assessment information in the programmatic improvement process is occurring. In fact, two self-study reports highlighted the potential contribution outcomes assessment evidence can make when it is used to support conclusions about the program.

Review Team Reports

In addition to the increased integration and use of assessment information in self-study documents, review team reports also exhibited an increased recognition of outcomes assessment. An examination of review team reports indicated the following recurring themes:

- ⇒ Teams often suggested solutions addressing student learning issues. Sometimes these issues were identified in the self-study document and sometimes they were not.
- ⇒ Teams sometimes recommended alternative strategies for collecting assessment information and at least commented on the appropriateness of the program's learning objectives and assessment methods.
- ⇒ In several instances, review teams used results provided in the self-study to back-up a suggestion made in their report.

Despite an increased awareness and recognition of assessment activities and evidence by review teams, two review team reports hardly addressed student learning. In these two circumstances, the review team's primary interest was in discussing the need for additional faculty lines and/or the need for a stronger research agenda. These issues overshadowed other issues (i.e. student learning) and perhaps in these circumstances rightly so. As was discussed in last year's annual report, assessment of student learning outcomes is only one factor to consider in evaluating program quality. Other issues affecting program quality may be paramount in some program reviews. When this occurs, a review team may offer no comment or suggestion in regards to student learning or the program's outcomes assessment activities and evidence. Therefore, it is important to continue to recognize that the objectives of the program review and the objectives of outcomes assessment are not always coterminous.

B. External Accreditation's

In 1999-2000, one college at UNL underwent a review by their accrediting commission. This college's accrediting commission had recently adopted criteria for programs to identify learning outcomes, methods of assessment, and a process that leads to continuous quality improvement. Comments in the accreditation site visit report frequently commended the college's progress and provided suggestions for improving their process and methods. These responses supported the accrediting commission's guidelines that were outlined to help make assessment evidence useful in the improvement to student learning. This feedback indicates that professional accrediting agencies can play a significant role in the progress of outcomes assessment at UNL.

C. Mid-Cycle Assessment Reviews

The 1999-2000 academic year marks the second year in which mid-cycle assessment reviews were conducted.⁵ In addition to the four reviews completed in 1998-99, seven reviews were conducted in 1999-2000. Mid-cycle reviews are scheduled to occur two to three years before the academic program review (APR). The purpose of the review is two-fold:

- 1) Provides a forum where a focused discussion about assessment activities allows faculty to reflect on their assessment efforts and obtain suggestions or ideas for improving their assessment plans so they can obtain meaningful and useful information about student learning.
- 2) Provides a mechanism for: 1) clarifying the expectations for assessment efforts, 2) sharing successful assessment strategies used by other colleges/programs at UNL or other institutions, and 3) obtaining a broad sense of where the institution stands in their assessment efforts.

The following discussion provides a summary of the extent to which these two purposes were served in the 1999-2000 reviews.

Purpose 1: Reflection and Suggestions

One goal of the review is to assist a department in determining the usefulness of their assessment process in improving student learning. Primarily two criteria are used when determining if an assessment process is useful. First, how well does the assessment process provide insight into learning issues that interest the department? Second, does the amount of faculty time invested in conducting assessment result in the evidence needed to improve the educational process? Focusing on these criteria in mid-cycle reviews conducted in 1999-2000 resulted in the following lessons:

- ⇒ Alternative strategies for directly measuring student learning were explored once it was determined that the current method was requiring an immoderate amount of faculty time and was not providing useful evidence about student learning. The alternative strategies proposed would make better use of existing courses and course products rather than administering an additional process beyond students' coursework. The benefit in using these alternative strategies is that they would minimize the demand on faculty time and provide useful information.
- ⇒ The issues underlying the redesign of a major served as a focus for also redesigning the assessment process for that major. Because the new major

⁵ See pages 6-9 of the 1998 University-wide Assessment report for a history of the development and purpose of the mid-cycle review.

attempted to improve the “progressivity” of the curriculum, obtaining assessment information from students throughout their program (in addition to information collected at the conclusion of their program) was considered. This additional information would assess student learning developmentally as well as provide a mechanism for monitoring distinctions outlined for different course levels.

- ⇒ It was suggested that indicators of student learning representing various inputs, processes, and outputs in the educational process be linked to improve their usefulness. This would involve determining which inputs effected the processes that effected outputs. This linking could assist in determining how the modification in one indicator led to changes or improvements in other indicators. In addition, linking indicators could assist in determining what changes might lead to improvements in student learning and if additional information was needed to obtain more compelling and useful evidence about student learning.
- ⇒ Because only a small number of majors graduated from a program each year, it was difficult to make accurate conclusions about student learning from the assessment evidence. It was suggested that assessment evidence be collected every year but analyzed only every few years. This scheduling provided more stable evidence on which to base conclusions about student learning. In addition, this change made time available for addressing the departments other contributions to student learning (i.e. graduate programs, service courses, etc.).
- ⇒ To make the assessment process more manageable, a framework was created to determine which learning objectives were already being assessed by products from *existing* courses and internships. This exercise insured that add-on assessment methods would not be created when methods for assessing objectives already exist.
- ⇒ The appendix of the mid-cycle report was modified to enhance its usefulness. The report’s appendix was expanded to serve as a toolbox addressing the specific assessment activities and issues of the department. This toolbox includes practical how-to resources (i.e. book excerpts, articles, and checklists), examples from other departments, colleges, or institutions, and frameworks for organizing and structuring assessment activities. Although this appendix was customized for each department, several resources proved to be applicable to almost all circumstances (i.e. example senior surveys, suggestions for writing objectives, etc.).

Purpose 2: Communication

The mid-cycle review has been an effective forum for clarifying expectations and discussing the benefits of outcomes assessment. The Coordinator has been told on more than one occasion that the meetings provide faculty a better sense of how and why

assessment should be conducted and reduced their anxiety about the process. Specifically, the mid-cycle review has provided the opportunity to address common misperceptions. Appendix A contains misperceptions typically encountered at any institution engaging in a process of assessing outcomes.

In addition to clarifying expectations and correcting misperceptions, the coordinator specifically and continuously emphasizes that the purpose of the mid-cycle assessment review is to be helpful and constructive to departmental assessment efforts. It does so by encouraging and facilitating assessment activities that a department will find beneficial to their program's unique goals. The coordinator also emphasizes that the purpose of the review is not to focus on a department's assessment results or determine how well the department's students are meeting learning objectives but to focus on the department's assessment processes. This focus assists in determining how well the department's assessment activities are providing information on student learning outcomes that the program can use to improve their educational program.

The review has also been used to share assessment strategies used by other programs and to encourage and facilitate the use of existing data in the assessment of learning outcomes. In this year's mid-cycle reviews, the sharing of the assessment instruments and strategies of other programs were frequently incorporated into the mid-cycle review. For example, senior and alumni surveys used in other departments' could be shared among very different disciplines but still provide useful information about methods for assessing student learning (i.e. survey item format or content). In addition, a method used in the Architecture department that samples student work of varying performance levels could also be used by a variety of departments. This strategy could be universally applied because the technique involved sampling the best, worst, and average performance for comparison from one year to the next.

The reviews conducted in 1999-2000 revealed several things about the course of outcomes assessment at UNL.

- 1) First, there are varying levels of engagement and acceptance of the outcomes assessment process. Some faculty members are enthusiastic about the potential for the outcomes assessment process to improve their programs and their students learning. Others find the process a burdensome exercise that provides very little useful insight. This disparity can be attributed in part to the different missions of different departments. Those programs whose mission focus heavily on the success of their teaching view outcomes assessment more positively while those whose mission focus more on their research agenda view it less positively.
- 2) Although every department has at least one individual in charge of assessment and often a group of individuals interested and committed to the assessment process, the success of the process is confined by whether or not all faculty in the department participate. It is important that every faculty member that

contributes to a program understands and discusses the learning outcomes being achieved or not by graduates of the program.

- 3) Most assessment plans have an appropriate list of objectives that are measurable and focus on learning goals rather than teaching goals. However, many find methods used to measure these objectives are time-consuming and/or yield very little useful information. At this time, the most useful measures across the board appear to be senior exit surveys/interviews. These surveys/interviews are also the most commonly used assessment method.
- 4) Mid-cycle reviews have also revealed that the comprehensiveness of assessment plans and efforts (although particularly useful and relevant when outcomes assessment was initiated at UNL) has led to very general information. This general evidence is not always useful for addressing the specific issues facing the department. The review has been used to encourage departments to identify learning issues that faculty in the department are interested in then determine how their assessment process can provide useful information about those specific issues.

Conclusion

It is too early to determine whether the suggestions provided to departments in the mid-cycle review have assisted them in improving their assessment plans. This is because those programs that have undergone a mid-cycle review have yet to conduct an APR since their review. However, annual reports from departments who participated in a mid-cycle review in 1998-99 indicated that some of the suggestions made in the review were adopted. If the review has assisted in that improvement, the program's Academic Program Review should use assessment evidence to document their program strengths while simultaneously gaining information about where and how to concentrate limited resources effectively.

Activity 2: Facilitate the annual reporting of college, departmental, and program assessment

In the fall of 1997, an annual reporting process was initiated to institute an on-going process for the colleges to communicate progress on their assessment of learning outcomes. Deans were asked to either send copies of each department/program's annual report or to summarize the annual reports and retain file copies of the detailed reports for reference by the University-wide Assessment Coordinator in preparing for mid-cycle reviews or academic program reviews. The letter requesting the 1999 annual reports on 1998-99 assessment activities can be found in Appendix B. Because these reports are called for each fall, the college and its departments/programs are asked to report on the assessment activities they conducted in the

previous academic year. Therefore, this summary represents the results of assessment activities completed by the colleges, departments, and programs during the 1998-99 academic year.

Programmatic improvement is the most important criterion for determining the progress of outcomes assessment at UNL because it is the primary reason that accrediting agencies (regional and professional) are requiring institutions to assess learning outcomes. The college's annual reports indicate that assessment is informing programmatic improvement. Appendix C contains a detailed narrative highlighting the variety of ways outcomes assessment has informed programmatic improvement.

Overall, the colleges and their programs continue to progress in their outcomes assessment efforts. This progress is a critical accomplishment given that quality outcomes assessment is achieved by a continual reflection on and corresponding refinement of assessment over time. Conclusions about the progress of assessment at UNL takes into account the specific approach to assessment taken by each college. This is important because it has been found that differing approaches may better represent the structure of a college's curriculum. For instance, the College of Business Administration has chosen to initially focus its undergraduate assessment on that common core because all majors are required to take a common core curriculum within the college and 50% of the students chose a general major in which the foundation is that common core. In contrast, the College of Arts and Sciences does not require a common curriculum core of its majors and, therefore, all departments were asked to focus on their undergraduate majors. These two examples illustrate that although a review of the annual reports may seem to suggest a wide disparity in departmental activity, it makes sense that different colleges use different strategies for approaching the assessment of student outcomes. With this clarification, it can then be surmised that using a prescriptive criterion for assessing progress of outcomes assessment in each college would not be valid. Instead, a better indicator is whether the activities in each college continue to improve or build upon their assessment each year. The following notes characterize this progress:

Note 1: There appears to be more follow-up on programmatic changes to determine if they had the desired impact.

Note 2: Assessment plans are being modified or redesigned because they have been implemented long enough to indicate that the evidence being collected is no longer insightful or is not answering questions of interest.

Note 3: There is a marked increase in the conversations and considerations of programmatic change spurred by assessment evidence.

Note 4: At this time, indirect measures (i.e. senior and alumni surveys) have been more influential on considerations and actions for improvement than direct measures. Since indirect measures are easier to design, administer, and analyze it is logical that they have provided more useful information. However, information provided by indirect measures is limited in that it only represents perceptions of learning rather than actual demonstration of learning.

Note 5: Interdisciplinary programs, in particular, are benefiting from conversations about student learning based on their assessment of student learning outcomes. This result speaks positively about the contribution outcomes assessment can make in the improvement of programs with faculty who normally do not occupy office space near each other because they are from different departments. Therefore, assessment is creating a context for conversations that are benefiting these programs.

In conclusion, although the use of assessment results could be more pervasive, the fact that progress continues to be made yearly indicates that the university is headed in a direction that has the potential of leading to more meaningful and useful assessment work.

Activity 3: Initiate and monitor, where appropriate, the assessment of graduate student learning outcomes.

At this time, the initiation of graduate assessment has occurred in several areas:

- The Graduate Studies office conducts an exit survey of masters and doctoral degree recipients. This survey asks outgoing graduate students' about their perceptions of and satisfaction with the adequacy of their preparation across a variety of domains. The survey also collects other indicator data such as average time to degree and placement after graduation. The Graduate Studies office formally offered to make these data available to colleges and departments for their assessment purposes.
- The College of Arts and Sciences began to assess their graduate programs in the 1997-98 academic year. This colleges accounts for 26% of the graduate degrees awarded annually by the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. Because of this their initiation of graduate assessment is particularly important. Appendix D contains a narrative highlighting some of the results of these efforts undertaken in 1998-99. In addition, in July the Office of Graduate Studies asked all graduate programs to provide a brief synopsis of their assessment plans and activities to date. This synopsis might include a copy of an already developed assessment plan or a summary of the plan in development.

Activity 4: Monitor assessment of the Comprehensive Education Program (CEP)

Plans for assessing the Comprehensive Education Program (CEP) include indirectly measuring the outcomes of the program with institution-wide surveys and using conversations initiated in the Peer Review of Teaching and Assessment project to facilitate the direct measurement of student outcomes.

A. Institution-Wide Surveys

In 1999-2000, the Bureau of Sociological Research administered freshman and senior surveys previously given in 1997-98. The freshman and senior surveys administered in 1997-98 provided a benchmark for future assessment of the program. Since the program was first applied to freshman entering in fall 1995, seniors surveyed in 1997-98 had not fully participated in the program and freshman surveyed at that time had just begun to fulfill the curricular requirements of the program. Although the freshman surveyed this year are in a similar position as freshman surveyed in 1997-98, the seniors surveyed this year will have completed the requirements of the program. Therefore, it can be determined how the program benefits students who have completed it by comparing the surveys conducted this year with the surveys conducted in 1997-98.

In addition, as requested by the colleges, a sufficient sample of freshman and seniors were surveyed from each college to permit responses to be separated by college. This separation of results by college makes the data about Essential Studies more useful since the course requirements for this CEP component varies with each college.

A full report on the results of these surveys is in Appendix E and will be discussed with the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee who is responsible for CEP. In the future, surveys will be administered every two years so that determination of the effect of the CEP program can be made over time.

B. Peer Review of Teaching and Assessment Project

The intention of the Peer Review of Teaching and Assessment project is to facilitate the direct measurement of the CEP program. Modifications to the University's original plan for directly assessing the CEP program were made in recognition of the need for greater faculty involvement in the assessment of the Comprehensive Education Program.⁶ This effort has been supported with funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. This support has provided the departmental teams involved in the project a stipend for focusing on the teaching of CEP courses in their discipline and the goals related to it.

The original Peer Review of Teaching project involved faculty teams developing individual teaching portfolios based on an exploration and discussions about their individual courses. The pilot project in 1998-99, differed from the original project because faculty teams from a department were asked to focus on the learning objectives for a set of courses rather than a single course in their discipline. In addition, these courses represented significant Integrative Studies (courses intended to develop critical thinking and communication skills) and Essential Studies (courses within eight knowledge domains) course offerings for the general education program at UNL. The 1999-2000 departmental teams were asked to determine during the first

⁶ Details regarding this modification can be found on pages 10-15 of the 1998 University-wide Annual Assessment report.

year of the project the integrated goals, methods, and student learning outcomes for a specific set of courses in their discipline. Although departmental teams selected the courses on which their discussions would focus, they were asked to include core courses in the department's major(s) that served either the Integrative Studies and/or Essential Studies general education requirements for both majors and non-majors. The final product from departmental discussions will be course portfolios that serve the same foundation for the scholarship of teaching and learning that articles in academic journals do for the scholarship of research. The creation of a foundation for the scholarship of teaching and learning is important because what makes scholarship is information that is accessible for review so that others can build upon that knowledge⁴. The course portfolios therefore provide a streamlined version of this foundation without having to reinvent the academic journal.

During the second year, conversations about the definitions of Essential Studies objectives will occur with past participants across disciplines. This sharing of information outside the discipline will begin to form a foundation for the establishment of definitions and learning objectives for general education requirements in key service courses. Involving project participants in discussions about the objectives of Essential Studies provides faculty who have developed a dialogue about the curriculum within their own discipline to expand that dialogue with other related disciplines.

There have been several lessons learned from the faculty conversations facilitated by the project thus far. First, a connection between quality teaching and the assessment of student learning outcomes is logical and necessary. Second, sharing perspectives about teaching and student learning with colleagues both within and outside a discipline leads to rewarding conversations. The reward lies in providing faculty recognition and input on their own courses and a deeper understanding of how their courses are contributing to or benefiting from the learning occurring in their colleagues courses. Third, the importance of developing a shared language for discussing teaching. Fourth, the value in establishing a group of colleagues for discussing teaching and student learning both within the department and outside of it. These lessons are being expanded with the support of the Pew Charitable Trusts. Through a four-year grant, UNL is collaborating with the universities of Michigan, Indiana, Texas A&M, and Kansas State to create a system of sharing ideas and issues with colleagues at other institutions yet in similar disciplines.

Another set of departmental teams with significant Integrative Studies and/or Essential Studies course offerings will be recruited this summer to complement and continue the foundation set by the past and present teams. This year has consisted primarily of creating the appropriate context for accomplishing the project's goals.

⁷ Hutchings, P., & Shulman, L.S. (1999). The scholarship of teaching: New elaborations, new developments. *Change*, Vol. 31(5).

Activity 5: Communicate useful assessment information to university faculty and administration.

A website, the university-wide assessment committee, the mid-cycle review, and the Teaching and Learning Center are four avenues used to communicate assessment issues and ideas with university faculty and administration. All four mechanisms have and can contribute to the progress of assessing outcomes at UNL in different ways as described below.

A. Website

The website (<http://www.unl.edu/svcaa/priorities/assessment.html>) lists the University-wide annual assessment reports and CEP assessment reports. These reports provide an annual overview of the institution, college, and departmental efforts to assess student learning. This overview spurs discussions needed to determine the future direction of assessment efforts.

B. University-Wide Assessment Steering Committee

The University-Wide Assessment Steering Committee is the body who discusses issues and solutions for guiding future assessment efforts and communicates information and changes about assessment with the college or division that they represent.

C. Mid-Cycle Assessment Reviews

In the 1999-2000 academic year the mid-cycle review discussions and reports, as previously discussed, have been used to share resources and examples that will assist faculty in departments in better determining the assessment methods that will work best for them and how best to implement those methods. In addition, the review has been an excellent mechanism for clarifying better the purpose of engaging in outcomes assessment activities and the expectations of the NCA and regional accrediting agencies.

D. Teaching and Learning Center

The Teaching and Learning Center provided several avenues in the 1999-2000 academic year for sharing ideas and strategies for outcomes assessment efforts. Two articles about assessment appeared in the Teaching and Learning Center newsletter. One article titled "Learning Outcomes Assessment at UNL" (October 1999) describes the purpose and value of engaging in the assessment of learning outcomes. Another titled "Writing Learning-Centered Objectives" (November/December, 1999) presents practical advice for writing objectives for a course that focus on student learning rather than the goals of the teacher.

The Teaching and Learning Center also hosted two workshops related to assessment. A 2-day workshop by Barbara Walvrod was sponsored jointly with the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural resources in January 2000. This workshop covered ideas and strategies for grading student learning in the classroom and for departmental assessment. The second workshop titled "Learning-Oriented Classes: Connecting Goals and Objectives to Assignments

and Assessment Tools” was given by TLC consultant Michael Anderson in April 2000

Activity 6: Plan for the focus visit by North Central Association (NCA) on the progress of outcomes assessment at UNL.

The NCA focus visit on the progress of assessment of student learning outcomes at UNL occurred on October 25-27, 1999. UNL was formally notified that it has been reaccredited through 2006-07 by the NCA (See Appendix F). UNL will make a progress report to the commission in December 2002 on the continued implementation of the assessment of student learning outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The 1999 University-wide Annual Assessment report concludes that UNL's efforts to assess student learning outcomes have come a long way. Our progress on outcomes assessment continues to evolve as many individual units have begun to use assessment evidence to reflect on their educational programs. This progress is highlighted in the college's annual assessment reports. In addition, outcomes assessment evidence is beginning to make a greater contribution to program self-assessment at the time of Academic Program Reviews and/or Accreditation. To continue this progress we should:

1. View outcomes assessment as a continuous process of reflecting on and improving our educational programs
2. Communicate the expectations and benefits of engaging in an effective assessment process.
3. Identify strategies that reward and recognize meaningful outcomes assessment processes.
4. Provide assistance to departments/programs struggling to plan and implement an assessment process that can be useful to them.

Attention to these four focuses will continue to support assessment that will be meaningful and useful in anticipation that the benefits of assessment will then be communicated.

Based on the conclusions of this report the following recommendations will serve as a guide for the University-Wide Assessment Steering Committee's actions during the 2000-01 academic year:

Recommendation 1: Continue to monitor the integration of outcomes assessment evidence into UNL's program planning/budgeting process which includes Academic Program Review and External Accreditation that is discipline-specific;

Recommendation 2: Consider the results of faculty conversations centered around CEP with the Peer Review of Teaching and Assessment Project;

Recommendation 3: Continue to facilitate the development and annual reporting of college, departmental, and program assessment activities;

Recommendation 4: Support efforts to plan and implement assessment of graduate student learning outcomes;

Recommendation 5: Communicate the benefits and share the successes of engaging in an effective assessment process;

APPENDIX A

This appendix identifies common misperceptions about outcomes assessment that are typically encountered at any institution engaging in an outcomes assessment process. Accompanying each misperception is a clarification correcting the misperception.

1. *Quantitative measurement is the only acceptable method for collecting data and to conduct good assessment a department must do a lot of “number crunching”.*

Clarification: A variety of methods both qualitative and quantitative can be used to collect evidence about student learning. A program should use those methods that their discipline finds most familiar and appropriate.

2. *Evidence collected is used for accountability.*

Clarification: UNL’s outcomes assessment process should be about improvement and not accountability (unless a department decides to use it as such). A college/department should collect outcomes assessment evidence that addresses programmatic learning issues *they* are interested in and *they* consider critical to their future success. Once collected this evidence should be used *by a department* to formally appraise and document for *itself* how the department contributes to and could improve student learning. At the time of the Academic Program Review or Accreditation, this documentation can help highlight those contributions as well as indicate areas of improvement.

3. *In order to assess student learning appropriately an additional measurement process has to be created outside of the information already obtained in the curriculum (i.e. course assignment, program portfolios, etc.).*

Clarification: When a department is trying to determine the best way to measure a learning outcome they should first look at what products already exist before creating new assessments.

4. *The exercise of assessment only needs to be conducted by an individual faculty member or a committee. There is no need for other faculty in a program to be involved.*

Clarification: In order for the assessment process to address important issues and result in significant conclusions it is important for all faculty to participate in the discussion of results and what they may mean in terms of student learning.

APPENDIX B

October 1, 1999

[NAME]
Dean, [COLLEGE]
[CAMPUS ADDRESS]

Dear Dean [NAME]:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that the date for submission of your 1999 college assessment report is December 3.

As you may recall, the University Assessment Plan approved by the NCA requires the University-wide Assessment Committee to oversee preparation of a university-wide annual assessment report. Your office should have received a copy of the 1998 Annual Assessment Report earlier this fall; the report is also now available on the UNL website (www.unl.edu/svcaa/Resources/Assess98.html).

The college assessment report is an important component of the university-wide report. In addition, the college assessment report is useful in the preparation for mid-cycle reviews. Any program/department undergoing a mid-cycle review is not required to produce a report at that time because past college assessment reports provide adequate documentation.

This year's request has been slightly modified to ask for a brief commentary (1-2 paragraphs) from both the college *and its departments* regarding how assessment is proceeding in the college or department. If your college has already collected 1998 reports from your departments, this commentary need not be included in this year's annual assessment report. However, please request that your departments include this commentary in next year's report. Below you will find the types of documentation we anticipate will be included in the college/departmental assessment reports.

1. Overview of the assessment plan:
 - \$ program-level objectives for student learning,
 - \$ methods used to measure learning objectives (including copies of any instruments used)
 - \$ how responsibility for assessment is handled (e.g., an assessment coordinator, an assessment committee, the undergraduate committee, the curriculum committee)
 - \$ how results are communicated to your faculty as a whole
2. Summary of your data collection:
 - focus of your data collection
 - results and interpretation of the data collected
 - actions proposed or taken as a result of assessment information

3. Brief commentary (1-2 paragraphs) by the college and its departments about how assessment is proceeding in the college/department (i.e. efficiency, usefulness, meaningfulness, etc.)

If your assessment plan (i.e. objectives, methods, responsibility, etc.) has remained unchanged since the previous report feel free to refer back to that report. This will keep the demand of these reports to a minimum. Note that information regarding the focus of your assessment activities for the year, the summary of results and actions, and your commentary are particularly important to the University-wide Assessment Committee. This information is useful in determining the future course of outcomes assessment and how this process can be better developed and conducted at UNL.

As a reminder, you have two format options for your college assessment report.

1. Include copies of the detailed annual reports submitted to you from each program/department, along with information on your college-level activities (i.e. college-wide survey, etc.). If a program has submitted a self-study for academic program review or accreditation, that self-study can serve as its annual assessment report, provided adequate information about their assessment plans, activities, and results are included in that document.

or)

2. Forward just a summary of program and college level assessment activities to our office. If you choose to send only a summary, you will need to keep on file copies of the detailed reports (both department and college level) that we may refer to as needed.

Although we hope that assessment activities and documentation are becoming more routine for all programs, outcomes assessment that truly aids program improvement is ever evolving. This evolution involves addressing new questions or re-examining earlier questions from a new perspective. I look forward to reviewing your reports and helping to share your ideas with colleagues across the university.

Sincerely,

Jessica L. Jonson
University-wide Assessment Coordinator
208 Admin (0420)

APPENDIX C

This appendix details examples of the effects of outcomes assessment at UNL. However, because the purpose of this section is only to provide a broad summary, the identification of the college/department/program involved is not included. This anonymity also emphasizes that assessment information is to be collected by a college/department/program to inform their own efforts for improvement and not as an accountability measure to outside constituents unless the college/department/program chooses to use it as such. It should also be noted that this listing provides only a representative sampling rather than a comprehensive list of assessment activities. Therefore, conclusions based on this narrative should be used to qualitatively evaluate the progress of outcomes assessment at UNL rather than quantitatively evaluate UNL's progress.

Effects are summarized within five categories. These five categories represent the different types of actions resulting from assessment activities. The five categories are:

- I. Modification to assessment plans
- II. Discussion of programmatic issues highlighted by assessment activities
- III. Consideration of actions to improve student learning
- IV. Action taken to improve student learning
- V. Follow-up on actions taken to improve student learning

I. MODIFICATIONS TO ASSESSMENT PLANS

- ⇒ Instructors created and enhanced scoring rubrics for courses used to assess learning outcomes after attending a Teaching and Learning Center workshop that assisted them in establishing clearer definitions of objectives and measurements.
- ⇒ Because assessment activities produced a lot of information about the process of student learning but very little information on the outcomes of student learning, the assessment plan was modified so that evidence about student learning outcomes would also be collected.
- ⇒ Faculty who attempted to use seniors' job portfolios for assessing learning outcomes realized that this product did not provide the kind of information needed to improve student learning. Therefore, they considered using a one-hour portfolio class to modify the contents of the portfolio to accomplish both.
- ⇒ Faculty reconsidered how they collect information from graduating seniors because they are unsure that one-on-one interviews with faculty were inhibiting students from being open in their responses.
- ⇒ Past assessment results were used to determine how to improve an assessment measure. The percentages of students who selected incorrect responses on multiple-choice questions were used to create a more logical set of "foils". The content of the exam is also frequently updated to represent the currency of the curriculum.

- ⇒ Educational Testing Service approached a college using one of their standardized exams for assessment purposes about a joint project. The joint project would allow the publisher to obtain information needed for validating the exam and the college would be able to administer the exam at no cost. In addition, the college would obtain additional background data collected by the publisher for use in studying factors that may affect students' performance.
- ⇒ Detailed protocol for assessment that outlined assessment methods, when and how those methods would be administered, steps in using the evidence collected, and who is responsible for each step was used to clarify the process for faculty.

II. HIGHLIGHTED ISSUES AND PROMPTED DISCUSSIONS

- ⇒ Responses on senior exit interviews indicated that the professional development of students was a skill needing to be addressed.
- ⇒ Evaluation of students' final papers indicated a need for a course highlighting research methods and grant writing.
- ⇒ Students responses on senior exit interviews indicated they did not understand the philosophy behind the structure of the curriculum and indicated a need to communicate that philosophy to students so they better understand why they are required to take some courses.
- ⇒ Less than positive responses on senior exit surveys, indicated that actions needed to be taken that promoted faculty and student interactions, improved students' educational experiences, and encouraged the involvement of student in activities outside of class.

III. CONSIDERATION OF ACTIONS TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING

- ⇒ Faculty discussions about student deficiencies exhibited in their portfolios led to the conclusion that these skills may not be covered adequately in the existing curriculum. Therefore, a new course was considered for the major.
- ⇒ The feasibility and potential benefits of offering a research seminar to sophomores, in addition to the research seminar offered to seniors, was considered due to students' request in senior exit surveys to encounter these skills earlier in their education. In addition, evidence from assessment measures indicated that seniors who took classes that focused on research skills earlier in their education had higher quality research papers.
- ⇒ Faculty generated several ideas for addressing the poor ratings given on student exit surveys regarding opportunities to interact with faculty. These ideas included email distribution list

and formal meetings that provided an opportunity for faculty and students to get to know one another.

- ⇒ Students' dissatisfaction with advising led to the consideration of organizing advising seminars and the creation of advising packets.
- ⇒ A strategy for exploring how a senior seminar could be changed to improve student performance and perceptions was considered. This strategy would involve bringing together all faculty members who have taught the seminar to discuss its content, structure, and format.
- ⇒ Student responses on exit interviews led faculty to reconsider the core curriculum by determining how that core fits together and whether the core meets the students future needs after they graduate.
- ⇒ Exit interview responses encouraged the consideration of a capstone course that synthesized the curriculum of the program in the student's final semester.

IV. ACTIONS TAKEN TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING

- ⇒ A new major was created after realizing that student's inadequate performance on a standardized exam highlighted areas in which the curriculum did not adequately cover the breadth of the discipline.
- ⇒ Student responses in exit interviews encouraged a change in the advising structure to improve communication about the program and its requirements.
- ⇒ The hosting of an awards ceremony was prompted by students' request in exit interviews for more student recognition.
- ⇒ To improve seniors' performance on theses a non-credit course in identifying problems for a thesis and preparing a thesis was initiated.
- ⇒ Discrepancies between the ratings of faculty and students regarding each student's achievement of the program's learning objectives prompted one program to conduct a curriculum review to determine which courses emphasized the skills needed to achieve the objectives in question. This review led to addition of a new course to the major.
- ⇒ New and existing courses that could contribute to the completion of requirements for a major were identified and added to the program of studies because students requested more course variety and increased frequency of offerings.
- ⇒ Student learning deficiencies in a core course prompted the identification of a set of course objectives that would be documented in all syllabi for that core course. This requirement

helped insure that the material covered in each core course remained consistent across instructors.

- ⇒ To improve students' written work, criteria for evaluating the writing and examples of good performance were publicized in the syllabi.
- ⇒ In an effort to clearly articulate the objectives for core courses in a program, teaching circles of instructors for each core course were created. These teaching circles discussed what was being taught and how it is taught so that common learning objectives for that core could be clearly articulated. This discussion led to a reevaluation of the final class project and experimenting with ways to connect information in one course with subsequent courses.
- ⇒ Student input in senior exit interviews prompted the establishment of a resource library with the assistance of private companies.
- ⇒ Students' requests in senior exit interviews for more opportunities to work with students in related majors prompted the establishment of a learning community with students from each of the related majors. In addition, faculty discussed projects that would require students from all three majors to work together.
- ⇒ A focus on enhancing research skills and written communication through a review and modification of the curriculum was instigated by senior and alumni survey responses.

V. FOLLOW-UP ON ACTIONS TAKEN TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING

- ⇒ In response to students' request on exit surveys for a better sense of community, faculty arranged several programs/groups to address that request. This included a mentoring program and revitalization of an honor society. The contribution of this action was monitored in the first year by assessing the amount and quality of participation. Although participation was low the quality of the participation by those involved (i.e. enthusiasm and feedback) provided some ideas on how participation might be improved in the future.
- ⇒ The assessment of products from the second course of a two course sequence indicated that changes made in the first course led to improvement on objectives in the second course.
- ⇒ Because using peer review improved the quality of senior papers, a more structured framework for students to engage in the peer review process was created.
- ⇒ How well students continue to acquire content and behavioral outcomes will be monitored with an annual assessment measure. This measure provides a benchmark for knowledge and skills before changing the curriculum from a paper based environment to a multimedia environment.

- ⇒ A follow-up review of student portfolios after a new core curriculum had been instituted indicated that students illustrated a higher level of creativity and had better technical skills for the discipline. Faculty expect that after the new core curriculum be better established additional improvements in student proficiencies will be obtained.
- ⇒ The full participation of all faculty members in a portfolio review process resulted in faculty obtaining a better understanding of the skills and knowledge gained by students throughout the program (rather than just the faculty member's individual course). This participation also provided faculty a better sense of they each could enhance student learning. This led to improvement in students' written communication and increased sophistication in their use of technology.
- ⇒ Continual dialogue among faculty has assisted in the assessment of learning objectives because faculty members have reinforced the criteria for assessment in their individual course assignments.

APPENDIX D

Highlighted in this appendix are examples of the variety of ways graduate programs are using outcomes assessment. These effects have resulted primarily from efforts undertaken by the College of Arts and Sciences.⁵ In 1997-98, the college initiated assessment of graduate outcomes because assessment of the undergraduate major was well underway and running smoothly. Because the completion requirements for graduate programs (i.e. comprehensive exams, thesis/dissertations, etc.) are consistent across different disciplines, the college provided departments a listing of possible measurement dimensions (i.e. process/resource and outcomes) and methods for measuring each dimension. These guidelines led to the implementation of three assessment methods by most programs.

1. Creation of a system for tracking student progress through the program that gathers information on indicators such as time to completion, funding, area of study, etc.
2. Implementation of a checklist for rating student achievement of learning objectives on thesis/dissertations and comprehensive exams. This checklist is completed by those faculty members serving on the student's committee.
3. Use of data from surveys of graduate faculty, graduate students, and graduate alumni funded and administered by the college.⁶ These surveys contained a core set of items generally related to all graduate programs and each program had the opportunity to add questions specific to its own concerns. Survey results provided to a program included responses from those associated with the program as well as a summary of college-wide results to serve as a benchmark.

Survey results served as the primary basis for the effects highlighted in this appendix. Not enough information has been collected through the tracking system and checklist to determine reliably how to improve learning in the program.

The following is a description of the kinds of activities spurred from assessment evidence collected in 1998-99.

- ⇒ Students' poor performance on several learning objectives led one department to consider changes in curriculum requirements and add an examination of these objectives after the students first year of study.

⁵ Note that departments in other colleges with a graduate program but no undergraduate program are also developing and implementing assessment plans for those programs.

⁶ The college surveyed graduate faculty and graduate students in 1998-99 and surveyed graduate alumni in 1999-2000.

- ⇒ To improve student performance on the program's learning objectives a group advising session was held before registration each semester to explain the courses available and why those courses are important to the graduate study.
- ⇒ One department began offering courses in their own department previously covered by courses in other departments after students responded that the courses in other departments failed to meet their educational needs.
- ⇒ In the process of creating a structure for collecting ongoing assessment data from students, one department initiated a review of the structure of their graduate program.
- ⇒ Several departments implemented a program to improve the training of graduate teaching assistants. These programs involved: a) requiring or encouraging participation in the college's Preparing Future Faculty program which assisted students in preparing a teaching dossier and discussing issues they would face, b) attending the Teaching and Learning Center's workshops geared toward graduate teaching assistants, and c) offering a required teaching seminar before students could be given full responsibility for teaching a course.
- ⇒ Student weaknesses in areas important to their future employment (i.e. teaching experience, professional development, broad coverage in the discipline, etc.) encouraged several departments to consider strategies for making students more competitive in the job market.
- ⇒ Several departments planned to use their assessment methods for evaluating the benefits and disadvantages of combining introductory graduate courses with upper level undergraduate courses (i.e. 400/800 level courses).
- ⇒ One department identified the need for a method of assessing teaching outside the classroom (i.e. dissertation supervision, student achievements, and placement success) for recognition and reward.
- ⇒ Assessment results indicated to two departments that they needed to consider whether graduate student teaching loads were delaying program completion. In contrast, another department recognized that completing a program too early might keep graduate students from fully developing their research skills and professional development.
- ⇒ To improve students' professional development one department schedule several brown bag seminars to discuss research, teaching, and career searches. Another department added a one-hour seminar on professional development that each graduate student was required to take during the spring of their first year.
- ⇒ One department plans to use future assessments to monitor efforts to improve student involvement in research.

- ⇒ One department plans to assess the effect of their revised program guidelines by using survey results from faculty, student, and alumni as a benchmark.
- ⇒ Assessment evidence indicated to several departments that recruitment of graduate students was an area in need of improvement.
- ⇒ Some departments planned to use the tracking system as a way to improve students' time to completion.

APPENDIX E

**THE ANNUAL CEP ASSESSMENT REPORT
IS NOT YET AVAILABLE**