

ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES COMMITTEE REPORT

February 21, 2006

The Assessment of Educational Outcomes Committee has met approximately every three weeks throughout the year. As previously reported, the university's accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) expires in spring 2009, and assessment clearly has assumed a more prominent role in the accreditation process since the university's last accreditation visit. As such, the Committee has viewed its mission this year with high importance.

The Committee began by reviewing the UM-St. Louis 1998 North Central Association Self-Study and the UM-St. Louis Campus Assessment Plan (<http://www.umsl.edu/services/cad/cap.html>). In consultation with Dr. Walker de Felix, Associate Provost, we also sought to identify any other assessment related efforts that have been initiated through the Provost's office.

Based upon the Committee's review, the current UM-St. Louis' assessment model is largely decentralized and test intensive. The various colleges, departments and programs appear to be responsible for meeting their own accreditation standards and do so with minimal administrative involvement from outside the unit. Assessment of General Education is carried out according to the "Campus Assessment Plan" through the Center for Academic Development (CAD). The CAD webpage contains a thorough and detailed description of General Education assessment at UM-St. Louis, most of which involves the use of standardized tests (e.g., Academic Profile). At the institutional level each of these approaches provides useful data for summative purposes, but the absence of a formal and comprehensive university assessment plan makes it difficult to determine what impact the results have on instructional practices or how curricular revisions would have been initiated, reported, and documented.

In addition to reviewing our own assessment efforts, the Committee examined the assessment plans from a sample of comparator institutions. The original list of 33 institutions was narrowed down to the following 9 who appeared to possess exemplary assessment plans: UM-Columbia, Wichita State University, Northern Illinois University, Western Michigan University, Indiana State University, University of Akron, Illinois State University, Cleveland State University, and University of Toledo. Common characteristics among these institutions include a) extensive and detailed university assessment plans that are readily available on the website; b) allocation of one or more full-time personnel to assessment activities (eight had a designated Director, Coordinator or Associate Provost of Assessment); c) a coordinated institutional assessment process that includes annual reporting (all but Indiana State University were centralized within Academic Affairs or similar administrative office); and, d) large assessment committees with strong administrative representation.

This activity was particularly striking when our plan was compared with institutions that recently had undergone HLC accreditation, many of which had required a second "focused visit" from HLC en route to accreditation as a follow-up to identified deficiencies (primarily in the area of assessment). As such, it is apparent that HLC has an expectation that institutions have a clearly articulated, comprehensive, and ongoing university assessment plan in place as a condition of accreditation.

To this end, the Committee has invested considerable time and effort in developing its recommendations regarding the "ideal" UM-St. Louis University Assessment Plan. We ask that the Faculty Senate carefully consider the following recommendations and endorse this report as a formal statement on behalf of the faculty regarding university assessment.

1. The decentralized model currently in place presents at least two primary challenges at the institutional level: a) documentation that assessment data are being used to influence instruction; and b) coordinating and summarizing the various types and sources of data being collected across the university. Consequently, a need exists to develop and implement additional assessment procedures that support the collection of

standardized data across the university. It appears two levels of assessment are indicated: one at the department or program level, and the other at the university level where annual reports can be compiled and continually cross-referenced with national accreditation standards.

2. A need exists to develop and support an institutional culture that embraces assessment. HLC clearly has embedded assessment across all criteria for accreditation, so anything less than a focused effort likely will be insufficient. Assessment no longer can be thought of as something that is done solely for accountability and accreditation purposes; it must influence and guide our institutional decisions. It is recommended that a campus-wide program of guest speakers, panel discussions, and open forums be scheduled to raise awareness of assessment issues across campus.

3. The committee recommends the appointment of Assessment Coordinators at the college, department and/or program level. While the exact designations are to be left to the discretion of the Deans, Department Chairs, and Program Coordinators, these appointees would constitute a new "University Assessment Committee" designed to review, share, and support specific assessment efforts in each unit. While this new committee may or may not replace the existing Assessment of Educational Outcomes Committee, it is clear that the current committee needs more continuity from year to year to play any significant role in the assessment process.

4. Emerging national trends suggest that university assessment, especially at an institution with the size and mission of UM-St. Louis, requires at least a full-time (or equivalent) position. Consistent with HLC standards, the committee recommends the reallocation of resources to support a designated Director of Assessment within Academic Affairs. The Director will assume primary responsibility for coordinating the assessment process, serve as Chair of the University Assessment Committee, and provide consultation as needed for the Assessment Coordinators and individual departments or programs. Despite the financial limitations and UM-System mandate to reduce administrative positions, the consensus of the Committee was that this must be an administrative position. It is believed that the hiring of a full-time, permanent Director of Assessment represents a superior option, both in terms of effectiveness and the message this sends regarding the institution's commitment to assessment.

Don Gouwens, Chairperson
February 21, 2006