A Note from the Associate Director

UVA Assessment, published periodically since 1999, was originally intended to share assessment research conducted by IAS and of general interest to the University community. This issue introduces a new purpose—a forum for sharing news and information with faculty involved in assessment.

We thank, once again, all assessment coordinators, chairs, program directors, and deans for their cooperation and effort in formulating assessment plans and documenting assessment-driven improvements for SACS reaffirmation. Reviewers were impressed with the quality of the plans and the commitment to excellence.

Of course, the planning effort for SACS was only the beginning. Now we, as a University, must actually conduct assessments and use the results to improve program administration, pedagogy, and/or curricula. We must also document and archive these assessments, especially when results have informed program improvements.

Learning outcomes assessment should build on and incorporate processes already in place. While methodologies can always be improved, know that an informed, deliberate faculty discussion about student performance, say, on comprehensive exams IS assessment, particularly when such discussions lead to program improvements.

Some programs implemented assessments this past spring. If you have not already done so, it is time to begin. Programs undergoing Program Review are expected to report on assessment activities and results in the self-study. Please note: between Program Reviews (which occur every 5-6 years), you will be asked to submit an interim update on assessment activities. (For more information on Program Review, including the schedule, see http://www.web.virginia.edu/iaas/assessment/assessprogramreview.htm.) As ever, please let us know how we can help as you tackle your assessments.

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Update: SACS Reaffirmation

On March 20–22, 2007 the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) On-Site Review Committee made a long-awaited visit to the Grounds as one of the final important steps in the University’s reaffirmation process. Six months earlier, the University had submitted a lengthy, detailed Compliance Certification to SACS. After an in-depth review of the submission, the Off-Site Review Committee of peer reviewers requested additional information that was to be provided prior to and during the site visit. To complete the process, the full Committee on Compliance and Reports will consider the Off-Site and On-Site Committees’ reports, conduct its own deliberations, and issue a final judgment in December 2007.

The process, from beginning to end, has been intense, comprehensive, and challenging. Reaffirmation of an institution, even one as distinguished as the University, is not guaranteed. The requirements related to program and student learning outcomes assessment have been especially problematic—in fact, a number of other universities have had difficulty achieving full compliance with two key requirements concerning assessment:

Core Requirement 2.5
The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide research based planning and evaluation processes that (1) incorporate a systematic review of institutional mission, goals, and outcomes; (2) result in continuing improvement in institutional quality; and (3) demonstrate the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission. (Institutional Effectiveness)

Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.
The institution identified expected outcomes for its educational programs (including student learning outcomes for educational programs) and its administrative and educational support services, assesses whether it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results. (Institutional Effectiveness)

Demonstrating compliance with the requirements regarding assessment entailed numerous submissions to SACS over 12 months:

September 2006
• The Compliance Certification described assessment at the program, school, and University levels, with examples of program improvements informed by assessment results.
• A supplement to the Compliance Certification contained approximately 250 academic program outcomes assessment plans entered into a web-based information management system (WEAVEonline).

February 2007
• The Focused Report contained information specifically requested by
Off-Site reviewers, including Institutional Assessment and Studies (IAS)-gathered documentation of over 300 assessment-driven improvements to policy and practice at the University, covering all academic and administrative areas.

- The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), a major undertaking for the University grounded in institutional assessment, is focused primarily on improving student learning or the student learning environment. UVa's QEP seeks to enhance student-faculty engagement and increase the number of undergraduates engaging in research and academic public service (applying academic knowledge to solve community problems).

March 2007
- Supplementary documentation, prepared for the On-Site Review Committee just before and during the site visit, provided additional information about current and historical student learning outcomes assessment.

August 2007
- Documentation on QEP assessment plans and other requirements will be submitted.

December 2007
- The SACS Committee on Compliance and Reports will render its final judgment.

The University expects to be reaffirmed for a period of 10 years, with an interim report concerning particular aspects of the core requirements and comprehensive standards due in five years (2012). While an interim report on learning outcomes assessment may be required, we know that the University will be required to submit an interim report on QEP assessment. Coordination of the QEP assessments is the responsibility of IAS.

Documentation of compliance with 2.5 and 3.3.1 was a multi-year process requiring a sustained, coordinated, and systematic effort. While IAS coordinated the formulation and collection of hundreds of assessment plans for each department and degree program, and then the collection and documentation of hundreds of examples of assessment-driven program and policy improvements, this planning and documentation could not have been possible without the wholehearted cooperation of the program and school assessment coordinators, deans, department chairs, and numerous other faculty and staff.

The Future for Assessment at the University

SACS reaffirmation has been a major undertaking this year and is likely to remain so in the future. Calls for greater accountability at the federal level, including testing to provide comparable data about what students learn, are keeping the pressure on accreditors to maintain or increase their expectations and standards. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings’ Commission on the Future of Higher Education issued a report with consequential recommendations for assessment practice.1 Misguided, invasive and seeming to lack understanding of the fundamental purpose of assessment—to help programs improve through evidence-based pedagogical and curricular innovation and initiative—these recommendations necessitate a strong and concerted response from the higher education community. The University must work individually and collectively with other universities, state councils of higher education and regional accrediting agencies to institute and support assessments that 1) recognize the diversity of program, school and University goals and purposes and 2) do not reduce student learning in higher education to a gain score on a standardized test. For an article outlining IAS’ position, arguments and evidence against the Spellings’ Commission recommendations, contact IAS.

The assessment of student learning and program outcomes, while mandated externally, ultimately helps programs improve—informed by meaningful quantitative or qualitative data. Asking important questions about what and how well our students are learning is not new to the University. However, formalizing the process, with careful definitions, measures and processes, and cataloging the use of results for improvement is new to most programs. It is essential that assessment be useful and feasible. Developing tools and resources to make it both is a significant part of IAS’ mission and will receive considerable attention over the next few years. Ultimately, assessments will be useful at the program level to the extent that faculty undertake them in earnest and with an openness to the potential benefits.

\[1\] Information about the Spellings’ Commission and its Report can be found online: