UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

PROGRESS REPORT TO
NORTHWEST COMMISSION ON
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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PROGRESS REPORT

I. INTRODUCTION

Utah State University’s last affirmation of accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (hereafter, NWCCU) was in 1997. At that time, the Commission noted that:

“While …. assessment activities are evolving in a generally positive direction, institutional efforts are uneven and coordination is lacking. Methodologies which assess outcomes rather than inputs, and quality rather than quantity, need to be improved in some cases and implemented in others.” (1997 Report, p. 55)

Based on the Commission’s recommendation, a focused visit was scheduled in 1999 to review progress on assessment. The 1999 reports found that “progress had been made, but much remains to be done, particularly in the area of developing outcomes measures”.

In October, 2002, George Dennison, President of the University of Montana, visited the USU campus in behalf of the Commission. His recommendation as a result of that visit was that:

“…..the University continue the development and refinement of its assessment plan and program to include specific learning outcomes measures for its programs and integrate the results into the institutional planning and decision making process.” (Dennison, p. 12)

In a letter dated January 14, 2003, the Commission requested that USU submit a progress report that “concisely” but “thoroughly and carefully” responds to the above recommendation. This report complies with that request.

II. PROGRESS SINCE OCTOBER, 2002

Utah State University has made significant progress in assessment since October, 2002. Detailed information is provided later in this document, but major accomplishments include:

- Assessment/accreditation activities are now centrally coordinated by the Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation (hereafter, AAA).

- Assessment has become a priority at USU.
  - A strategic plan for assessment/accreditation has been developed and adopted.
  - During the current academic year, more than fifty meetings were held on campus to explain where USU is on assessment/accreditation and to give direction on what needs to be done.

- Additional resources have been committed to assessment/accreditation. One FTE has been added to this effort and another 0.6 FTE will be added July 1, 2004. Operating budgets for this purpose have also been increased.
● An assessment “best practices” website has been developed to guide and assist academic departments in improving their assessment efforts. See http://aaa.usu.edu/AssessmentSuggest/SuggestionsHome.htm.

● A “Facts and Figures” website has been developed to provide “one-stop shopping” for USU data. See http://aaa.usu.edu/FactsFigures.

● A comprehensive program has been initiated for value-added assessment of general education.

● Finally, and most importantly, academic departments and academic support units have been given a charge and specific guidelines for improving their assessment efforts. If not already in place, each unit is to develop and implement an assessment plan that includes:
  
  • Learning objectives for each degree and program.
  
  • A mapping of learning objectives and courses.
  
  • A method for using the department’s integrating experience (e.g., capstone course, student teaching, senior project) to evaluate programs as well as students.
  
  • Other outcomes data, such as placement information and performance on national tests.
  
  • A well-defined process for using assessment data in department decision-making.

Departments have also been asked to maintain an easily-accessible assessment website that accurately reflects their assessment efforts. Considerable improvement has taken place during this academic year. Department activities are being closely monitored by AAA to assure that progress continues to occur.

III. ASSESSMENT COMPACT PLAN INITIATIVES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

When President Kermit Hall came to USU in January, 2000, he instigated a new process for strategic decision making called compact planning. The approach requires that individual units develop initiatives that are then negotiated with the unit’s supervisor until agreement is reached. The end product is a “compact” that specifies initiatives that will be pursued over the next few years. During Summer, 2003, a compact plan for assessment was developed by AAA and approved by the President and Provost. The initiatives in the plan provide a roadmap for improving assessment at the university. They also reflect increased central coordination of the university’s assessment efforts.

Initiatives in the university’s Assessment Compact Plan are designed to promote an on-going, comprehensive assessment/accreditation program. Part of the plan will be carried out centrally by AAA and part will be the responsibility of colleges and departments with assistance from AAA.

Although the plan is in the early stages of implementation, significant progress has been made and procedures are now in place to ensure continued and meaningful improvement in assessment at USU. The remainder of this report is organized to demonstrate progress that has been made in achieving the initiatives of USU’s Assessment Compact Plan. Following are the primary initiatives set forth in the plan and their status as of April, 2004.

Initiative: Assessment as a Priority

Objective: Assessment efforts will become a higher priority for campus leaders.
Strategy: A series of meetings will be held to make administrators and faculty more aware of the university’s current status with regard to assessment efforts, the need to improve, and plans for the coming year.

Accomplishments: The following meetings were scheduled and held by AAA between October, 2003 and March, 2004:

1. A multi-media presentation was made to deans and academic department heads in October, 2003. At this meeting, President Kermit Hall identified assessment as a key area where improvement is needed. The objective of the meeting was to clearly identify USU’s assessment needs and to introduce goals for 2003-2004.

2. A multi-media presentation that focused on issues and goals was made to USU’s Board of Trustees in November, 2003.

3. During November and December, 2003, meetings were held with deans and department heads of each of USU’s seven academic colleges. At this meeting, goals were discussed in greater detail and department heads were asked to complete a self-study relating to their departments’ assessment efforts. The self-study was completed and returned by every department. An example is attached to the end of this document.

4. During January and February, 2004, individual meetings were held with faculty in each of USU’s forty-two academic departments and the major academic support units. The status of each unit’s assessment efforts was discussed and goals for improvement were suggested.

5. Following the meetings with individual departments, a session was held with department heads to review what was learned.

Initiative: Improve and More Effectively Utilize Campus-wide Surveys

Objective: AAA conducts a series of surveys to determine student, faculty, and alumni experiences and satisfaction. Survey instruments and analyses of resulting data will be improved to make them more useful. In addition, survey results will be made more accessible.

Strategy: The following periodic surveys are administered by AAA:

Freshman/Sophomore. (Random sample. Every year)

Graduating Senior. (All graduating students. Every year. Basically, same items as frosh/soph survey)

Graduate Student. (All graduating students. Every year.)

Employment and Graduate Education of Recent Graduates. (All graduates during last year. Every year.)

Alumni. (Random sample. Every three years)

Faculty/Course Evaluation. (Every course, every semester)

CIRP. (All students. Every other year.)

NSSE. (Random sample. Every other year.)
FSSE (Random sample of faculty. Every other year.)

HERI Faculty Survey (All faculty. Every six years)

These surveys can be used more effectively for assessment purposes. The following changes will be implemented:

1. The format for reporting results and methods of distributing information for all surveys will be changed. In writing reports, the emphasis will be on identifying broad themes and making recommendations for improvement rather than simply reporting the numbers.

2. Survey instruments will be revised to assure that the most useful information is being obtained.

3. Survey administration will be reviewed. Where possible, web-based surveys will be used and opportunities provided for departments to add unit-specific questions.

4. Survey information will be made more accessible.

Accomplishments:

1. The structure of all survey reports has been changed to include an executive summary and a more concise reporting of data. More emphasis is being given to determine the implications of the data generated. Frosh/soph and graduating senior survey results have been jointly analyzed to evaluate attitudinal changes over time.

2. The Employment and Education survey has been completely revised. What was a loose collection of data by individual academic departments has been molded into a uniform telephone survey with a response rate above 85%.

3. Frosh/soph, graduating senior, and graduate student surveys will be revised during the next year.

4. NSSE is currently being administered after a hiatus of two years. FSSE is being administered for the first time.

5. The schedule for survey administration has been regularized and projected over the next five years.

6. Use of the internet for conducting faculty/course evaluations was successfully piloted during Fall, 2003.

7. All survey data are now available on the USU Facts and Figures website. See [http://aaa.usu.edu/FactsFigures/surveys.asp](http://aaa.usu.edu/FactsFigures/surveys.asp).

Initiative: Assessment of General Education

Objective: Conduct a comprehensive assessment of USU’s general education program.

Strategy:

1. Pre- and post-testing of a sample of general education courses to determine value added.
2. Use of focus groups to evaluate student perceptions and learning in general education courses.

3. Portfolio analysis to assess what actually occurs in general education courses and how student skills improve over time.

Accomplishments:

1. A pre-and post- survey was administered Fall Semester to all students in USU’s freshman orientation course. The survey included both attitudinal and course content questions, allowing analysis of attitudinal changes and learning as a result of the course. This information is being used to facilitate a complete revision of USU’s First Year Experience.

2. Pilot of a pre- and post-test was conducted in a large general education survey course.

3. Value-added in USU writing classes will be evaluated in a study scheduled for Fall, 2004. A sample of students in the freshmen composition class will be given a writing assignment and a sample of students in the sophomore level class will be given the same assignment. Responses will be evaluated to see (1) how writing skills have improved and (2) how the process (e.g., use of library and other information resources) of completing the assignment has changed.

4. Final examinations in general education mathematics and statistics courses will be systematically examined for a sample of students during Spring, 2004. The purpose of the analysis is to assess which components of the subject matter students have mastered and which areas reveal learning deficiencies and a need for curriculum revision.

5. Focus groups of students who have completed their general education requirements will be conducted in April, 2004. In addition to discussion, students will be asked to write a short essay regarding their general education experience. This is a pilot project that will be refined and then replicated each year.

6. NSSE results for first year students will be analyzed to determine student experiences in general education courses. FSSE results will be used to compare how faculty perceptions differ from those of students.

7. As noted in #1 above, USU is developing a new first year experience for freshmen students that will be implemented Fall, 2004. As part of that process, the First Year Experience Taskforce is formulating a comprehensive assessment plan.

8. As part of general education requirements, USU students must pass a Computer and Information Literacy (CIL) test. Results of the CIL were analyzed in 2003-2004 to determine student’s strengths and weaknesses. As a result of this analysis, significant changes will be made in the CIL test for next academic year.

Initiative: Time-Enhanced Learning

Objective: Assess time-enhanced learning courses

Strategy: Develop a web-based instrument for evaluating distance learning courses. Conduct telephone surveys to assess student perceptions and also employment changes as a result of taking time enhanced courses.

Accomplishments:

1. Two alternative approaches for web-based teacher/course evaluations were pilot tested during Fall, 2003.
2. USU’s Department of Continuing Education is conducting telephone surveys to assess employment impacts that resulted from taking time-enhanced courses.

**Initiative: Academic Department Assessment Plans**

**NOTE:** This is the key initiative in USU’s Assessment Compact Plan because it represents the core of USU’s mission as an educational institution.

**Objective:** Each academic department and academic support unit will develop and implement a comprehensive learning assessment plan.

**Strategy:** In recent years, academic departments have been encouraged to develop assessment plans and to add an assessment link on their website. These efforts were reviewed last fall and it became clear that some departments had not made much progress, while others had allowed promising assessment plans to lag because of other responsibilities. A concerted effort is being made during 2003-2004 to encourage the departments to upgrade their assessment activities. Part of this effort involved the meetings with department heads, deans, and faculty that have already been mentioned. At these meetings, academic units were asked to do the following (if they have not already done so) by the start of the next academic year.

1. Write/revise an assessment plan that includes items 2-6 below.

2. Develop/refine learning objectives for each degree and program.

3. Create a mapping (in most cases this will be a matrix) of learning objectives and courses. The purpose of this map is to assure that the unit’s curriculum is designed to promote achievement of the learning objectives.

4. Establish an integrating experience (e.g., capstone course, internship, student teaching, national test, research or creative project) for graduating seniors that requires students to bring together the knowledge and skills they have acquired. In almost every case, USU academic departments already have such an experience. The challenge is use it to evaluate the department’s programs in addition to evaluating individual students.

5. Identify and begin collecting information on other outcomes measures. Specifics were left for departments to decide, but the units were encouraged to implement an exit interview, conduct surveys of graduates and employers, analyze data from nationally-normed tests taken by their graduates, and utilize information from advisory groups.

6. Develop an explicit procedure for using outcomes data in department decision making and also provide examples of data-based decisions.

7. Maintain a user-friendly and up-to-date assessment website. This website should have a link from the department homepage and should include information on items 1-6 above.

**Accomplishments:**

1. As previously noted, each department head provided a self-study indicating the status of the department’s assessment efforts. This information was augmented by research from AAA staff who reviewed assessment information found on each unit’s website. Additional insights were obtained from the meetings conducted with the faculty of each department. The information from these sources was combined into an ACCESS database that includes links to unit websites. This database will allow department assessment activities to be
closely monitored over time. An example of the database maintained for each department is included as an attachment.

2. A “best practices” link has been added to the AAA website. Some departments requested guidance in developing their assessment plan. This link provides suggestions for navigation of assessment websites and also shows what selected USU departments have done in different areas of assessment. This website can be seen at http://aaa.usu.edu/AssessmentSuggest/SuggestionsHome.htm. For the reader’s convenience, a printed version is included as an attachment.

3. AAA has provided USU’s academic departments with a critical analysis of their current assessment efforts and clear guidelines as to what they need to do. Although it is too early to make a comprehensive evaluation, initial responses confirm that departments are making substantial progress. A number of units have contacted AAA for assistance or to indicate changes they have made in response to the meetings that were held.

**Initiative: Departmental Reviews**

**Objective:** Focus more on outcomes in departmental reviews.

**Strategy:** Guidelines for departmental reviews will be revised to require that outcomes measures be included. An effort will also be made to avoid redundancy between departmental reviews and other accreditation efforts in which the department must participate.

**Accomplishments:** The School of Graduate Studies has developed a comprehensive methodology for evaluation of graduate programs. This new approach relies heavily on outcomes measures and will be implemented starting Fall, 2004. The other portion of this initiative will be completed during 2004-2005.

**Initiative: Communication of Assessment Efforts and Results**

**Objective:** To better disseminate results of assessment activities and to demonstrate how they have been used for decision making and institutional change.

**Strategy:**

1. A report on assessment will be made to the Board of Trustees once a year and to the President’s Executive Committee and Dean’s Council twice each year.

2. A comprehensive and easily accessible website will be developed that will be a source of information about USU’s assessment activities.

**Accomplishments:**

1. A multi-media presentation was made to the Trustees in November, an assessment report was given to the Executive Committee in February, and individual meetings were held with the Deans and their department heads in November/December.

2. A comprehensive and user-friendly USU “Facts and Figures” website has been developed as a primary source for information about USU. This website is accessible from the USU homepage (click on About USU” at http://www.usu.edu and then Facts and Figures). For the reader’s convenience a printed version of the home page and a site map are attached.
**Initiative: Organizational Structure and Financial Support**

**Objective:** Create an organizational structure and provide needed staff to accomplish proposed assessment/accreditation initiatives.

**Strategy:**

1. Improve coordination of assessment/accreditation activities and establish appropriate reporting lines.

2. Increase staffing and operating budgets for assessment/accreditation.

**Accomplishments:**

1. In September, 2003, the university’s Assessment Compact Plan was approved and responsibility for assessment/accreditation was given to AAA, which now reports to the Provost’s Office.

2. As of July 1, 2004, an additional 0.6 FTE of professional staff will be added to AAA. This person will have a background in assessment and training in statistics. Two years ago, USU had 1.4 FTE who were directly assigned to assessment/accreditation. By July 1, 2004, there will be 3.0 FTE. Funding has also been provided by the Provost for a part-time graduate assistant.

3. Additional operating funds were provided by the Provost in Fall, 2003. These funds allowed purchase of needed computer hardware and also will allow AAA to implement the proposed schedule for surveys (notably NSSE, FSSE, CIRP, and the USU Alumni Survey).

**IV. CONCLUSION**

In January, 2003, NWCCU challenged Utah State University to:

…. continue the development and refinement of its assessment plan and program to include specific learning outcomes measures for its programs and integrate the results into the institutional planning and decision making process.”

USU’s Assessment Compact Plan provides a roadmap to respond to this challenge and the university is on track to complete the initiatives proposed in the plan. The initial result has been significant improvement in assessment at Utah State University over the last year. It would be premature to say that USU now has a pervasive “culture of assessment,” but the level of awareness and the expenditure of effort have clearly increased during the last year.

One focus during the coming year will be to continue to push academic departments and academic support units to move their assessments efforts to the next level. Some departments already have excellent learning objectives, outcomes measures, and a process for using assessment in decision making. Others have made less progress and will require more urging and assistance. Another focus will be to implement a more comprehensive method for assessing general education. Significant progress has been made this year, but assessment of general education is hurdle not yet fully cleared.

Based on progress made to date, USU will be ready for its 2007 review and intends to meet the standards and expectations of NWCCU regarding assessment.