UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

University Assessment Committee

Report on the Quality of Student Learning at the University
For the 2014-15 Academic Year

Introduction

During the 2014-15 academic year, the University Assessment Committee (UAC) developed, distributed, and collected the *Annual Program Improvement and Assessment Report* from 68 University of New England (UNE) reporting entities[1] and the *Annual College & Division Assessment Report* from the six UNE colleges (College of Arts and Sciences, College of Osteopathic Medicine, College of Pharmacy, Westbrook College of Health Professions, College of Dental Medicine, and Online College of Graduate and Professional Studies) as well as the Division of Student Affairs. The UAC had three primary objectives for these reports: (1) to promote a culture of student learning assessment and quality improvement at the university by documenting student learning outcomes, goals, and benchmarks; (2) to improve the quality of student learning and to raise the bar for pedagogy by encouraging reflection on assessment data and development of action plans that target areas of identified opportunity; and (3) to strengthen assessment practices throughout the university and offer an efficient means of sharing findings between colleges, programs, and divisions, as well as with external stakeholders and community members.

The UAC timeline, as stated in its "Guiding Principles, Policies & Procedures" handbook, called on the programs to submit the *Annual Program Improvement and Assessment Report* (Appendix A) on June 15th. The College Deans and the Vice President for Student Affairs were asked to synthesize the data from the reports and submit their findings in the *Annual College & Division Assessment Report* (Appendix B) on August 15th. The following report has been prepared by the University Assessment Committee, a 10-member committee comprising faculty and administration representatives from across the University, to communicate the findings of this process to the Provost and the UNE community.

Methods for Understanding the Reports

In Part A of the *Annual Program Improvement and Assessment Report*, the UAC used form E1.A of the NEASC E-series and developed five additional questions to help elucidate the process that UNE programs have utilized to assess student learning. The NEASC E1.A form asks programs to state:
- the formalization and publication of student learning outcomes;
- the data/evidence used to assess student learning outcomes;

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[1] Only one reporting entity, Medical Education Leadership, did not submit a report. At the time, the program was in a transitional state, moving from the College of Osteopathic Medicine to the Online College of Graduate and Professional Studies.

- the process employed to interpret the data;
- and the changes made as a result of that interpretation.

The four questions that the UAC added to the form ask about:
- the strengths identified in each program's assessment results;
- the challenges identified in each program's assessment results;
- the steps taken to improve student learning;
- and which learning outcome(s) UNE as a whole should address.

The UAC then asked the College Deans and the Vice President for Student Affairs to synthesize their program report findings and provide a summary analysis in the *Annual College & Division Assessment Report*. This reporting form asked the Deans to discuss:
- what the assessment findings revealed about strengths in student learning;
- the areas of student learning that require special attention;
- the actions needed to improve those areas;
- the improvements that have been made in majors or programs as a result of prior actions that were based on assessment findings;
- and the student learning outcomes that need the most attention by the university as a whole.

To facilitate analysis, the UAC, in conjunction with the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment (OIRA), identified broad categories/domains into which the student learning strengths and challenges cited in the above reports can be grouped. These categories/domains include:
- student learning of content knowledge;
- student learning of general education skills (including writing, math, and data collection and analysis);
- student application of skills;
- student job placement in the field;
- student personal growth and professionalism;
- pedagogical practices of faculty;
- program emphasis on interdisciplinary studies;
- and reflections on the assessment process itself.

Ongoing Assessment Activities

In addition to conducting major program assessment, the six UNE colleges and the Division of Student Affairs have also carried out their own assessment and faculty/staff development activities.

College of Arts and Sciences:
In addition to program assessment, faculty who teach in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Core Curriculum are conducting assessment on all 11 areas of the core curriculum. A formalized structure consisting of an overall Core Curriculum Assessment Coordinator and Core Area Coordinators organize the assessment work and reporting for each of the core groups. Interdisciplinary groups of faculty are assessing the interdisciplinary core areas. The

CAS Dean's office held several all-day workshops on core curriculum assessment where faculty refined assessment methods and evaluation rubrics, reviewed and summarized results, and planned curricular improvements. The CAS Dean's office also held a workshop for Department Chairs and Core Area Assessment Coordinators on completing assessment reporting forms. Major programs and core assessment groups reported on their use of assessment results to make curricular changes to improve student learning.

Westbrook College of Health Professions:
Westbrook College of Health Professions (WCHP) dedicated their winter leadership retreat to Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes where they spent the day immersed in writing appropriate student learning outcomes, examining direct and indirect methods of assessment, and discussing the department/unit organizational processes to promote a culture of continuous quality improvement.

Online College of Graduate and Professional Studies:
The Online College of Graduate and Professional Studies (CGPS) convened a series of meetings between the Director of Pedagogy and Assessment and each of the Program Managers to discuss assessment and to develop an assessment plan for the program. Since each of the programs had recently transitioned into CGPS, the meetings helped established the metrics and baseline for assessment of student learning and student success in the programs.

College of Osteopathic Medicine:
In 2015, the College of Osteopathic Medicine (COM) revised how it handles assessment and evaluation. The chair of Biomedical Sciences leads the new Assessment Committee. This committee is in its infancy and addresses student, faculty, and program assessment. The student assessment sub-committee is charged with ensuring that students meet or exceed clinical and basic science knowledge standards.

College of Pharmacy:
The College of Pharmacy (COP) has held several monthly faculty development sessions (mostly 2-hour meetings plus one all day event in January) and several hours during the annual summer faculty retreat about writing appropriate learning objectives and assessment techniques for the classroom. Within the last year, a task force was convened to redo the student learning outcomes for the college based upon the new accreditation standards, which were approved. A subsequent task force took the responsibility for designing assessments for those new student learning outcomes. A third task force is now using these new assessment matrixes into the design of a whole new curriculum slated for implementation in Fall 2017. Additionally, several faculty attended assessment conferences/institutes during the year.

The Assessment and Evaluation Committee of the college spent the better part of the last year developing the Overall Evaluation Plan for the college (which mostly covers programmatic and curricular assessment). The committee will begin on a separate Student Learning Outcomes Plan in late Spring 2016 once a blueprint for the new curriculum is presented. Work on the Student Learning Outcomes Plan is expected to take 6-9 months.

College of Dental Medicine:
The College of Dental Medicine (CDM) refined its formal assessment system during its accreditation self-study process in late 2014. The CDM Assessment and Outcomes Committee

(AOC), which meets at least twice a year, is charged with collecting assessment and outcomes data from the other CDM committees, analyzing and synthesizing that data, and generating annual reports for the Dean. The AOC is also responsible for relating findings back to the individual CDM committees and may provide recommendations for action.

At the CDM faculty and staff retreat in May, the Director of the Center for the Enrichment of Teaching and Learning (CETL) conducted a workshop with CDM faculty on writing effective exam questions and tying those questions directly to learning outcomes. In December, all CDM faculty and staff will convene for an all-college meeting, and the AOC chair will provide an update on the work of the committee as well as the University Assessment Committee (UAC). Assessment of student learning at the CDM is an ongoing, dynamic process, and a longitudinal student progression portfolio is currently under development. In addition, new software was purchased to facilitate the mapping of CDM competency statements to both delivery and assessment methods.

Division of Student Affairs:
The Vice President of the Division of Student Affairs organized meetings of unit directors during the Fall semester to ensure the alignment of unit learning outcomes with the strategic plan of the Division. Writing workshops were held to assist in this process, with time dedicated during two Division-wide meetings for the purpose of reviewing, generating feedback, and discussing the measures to be used for assessing progress. Ongoing meetings of Division leadership, at which assessment was discussed, provided for a collaborative approach and consistency in reporting. Each unit submitted an annual report through which progress and future goals were addressed. The use of data for strategic decision making was, and remains, a priority of Student Affairs.

Summary of Assessment Reports

Several colleges submitted reports that first mention their programs' challenges and then explain their programs' efforts to address those challenges, including some action plans that have already been put in place. CAS explains, for example, "In those programs in which assessment has been undertaken on a regular basis for some time, we see regular adjustments to courses and pedagogy aimed at improving learning outcomes." The report continues, "Syllabus changes, learning exercises and assignments, classroom activities, and evaluation instruments have been introduced, revised, or eliminated in a number of programs, including mathematics, environmental studies, English composition, and biology." In COM, "Course Directors regularly examine course-related assessments (RATS, progress exams, comprehensive exams, reflective essays, peer-to-peer feedback, facilitator assessments, and other methods an[d] tools) to implement in-course corrections in real time." The report continues, "In our first year medical knowledge course, for example, Course Directors instituted a weekly Review Session that is activated upon student request for specific topics." Thus, the college and division reports show that these programs are using assessment data not only to identify student learning challenges, but also to formulate action plans to address those areas of opportunity.

Some colleges observe programs' strengths and challenges within the same category/domain. COM, for instance, acknowledges in its program report that student learning and retention of content knowledge was both a strength and a challenge. "In all licensing exams, UNECOM students *exceeded the national average*," the report explains, "demonstrating the overall strength

of the program." However, "a small percentage of our students struggle to pass COMLEX Level-1." The program has been taking steps to monitor students and provide more support before and after they take the exam. CDM recognizes strengths and challenges within the content knowledge domain as well. The program believes "all students from our inaugural class (Class of 2017) achieved an appropriate level of competence…to begin treating patients in Spring 2015." Yet, the program has been trying to provide more support for first-year students by implementing the Student Success Team, an "early intervention initiative to identify struggling students and help them generate personalized improvement plans to prevent course failures." The report adds, "Assessment of this initiative is ongoing, but initial indicators (from the 2014-2015 academic year) suggest that it is helping to reduce the number of students who need to remediate a course."

While some colleges noted their programs have made incremental changes to improve the assessment process, others have only begun assessment. CGPS explains, "The changes and improvements within programs as a result of student learning assessment have been incremental (i.e., adding policies around course updates, and developing program-wide learning objectives)." However, CGPS finds, "Implementing a college-wide system will help track improvements that are currently being implemented, and will help to identify areas that need improvement." CAS explains, "In those programs where assessment is already a culture, we see greater progress than in those in which assessment remains a fairly nascent enterprise. Furthermore, it is critical that in the core curriculum, assessment includes all faculty teaching the relevant courses. Human Traditions, Social and Global Awareness and other core areas that transcend department boundaries are not as strong due to selective faculty participation." COP "is really just beginning true assessment of student learning. A Student Learning Outcomes Plan is slated to be designed in AY 2015-2016 based upon the structure of the new curriculum."

After inquiring about the colleges' strengths and challenges, the report asks colleges about the student learning outcomes they think UNE as a whole should address. Five colleges request more emphasis on improving students' oral and written communication skills; three colleges want the University to focus on further developing students' professional values and behavior, as well as emotional intelligence and resilience; three colleges want UNE to develop more tools to measure assessment; two colleges seek more emphasis on developing students' critical thinking skills; two colleges want UNE to further encourage student service learning and community outreach; one college wants students to improve their math, data, and computation skills; one college wants UNE to foster students' research and citation skills; and one college believes UNE needs to better address diversity.

Implications

The UAC has drawn several meaningful conclusions from this annual assessment process:

1. First and foremost, every reporting entity[2] completed and submitted a report, which is a major achievement in this first year of carrying out a revised assessment process. All programs and colleges are now engaged in formal assessment. By shaping and refining their curriculum, activities, and assessments, UNE programs and colleges demonstrate

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[2] With the exception of Medical Education Leadership.

that they value students and understand the need to successfully prepare students for their careers. Moreover, administrators have recognized the importance of tracking student learning outcomes and following up with programs on meeting assessment needs. "I was pleased to find that all of the programs in WCHP have an assessment process; this is a critical first step," writes the Dean of WCHP. UNE has embraced assessment and its rewards.

2. In the time since the assessment reports were generated, constructive meetings and discussions have taken place within the university about the assessment process and report results. The CAS Dean, for example, distributed the CAS Dean's assessment report at a Department Chair meeting and discussed overall college assessment results and aspects of the assessment process that need more attention in the coming year. CAS Chairs were invited to share the Dean's report with faculty in their departments. Other colleges have also shared assessment findings.

3. The reports noted many successes in student learning, and we see evidence of this every day from UNE students and programs. These include student success in passing national certifications exams; student application of content knowledge and skills in internships, clinical settings, and on the job; and student civic engagement and social responsibility on campus and in communities. These successes naturally require ongoing attention and improvement. Student Affairs has incorporated "workforce/professional competencies...into the RA Training and Student Employee Training programs" and has "launched a focus on positive psychology principles as a framework for the Division of Student Affairs team and its work with students."

4. However, most programs still need to assess postgraduate impact, which would lead to a key source of information that could inform curriculum, pedagogy, and student learning.

5. Some programs are still in the process of refining their student learning outcome assessment methods. COM explains, "For the Health Sciences programs, more attention should be paid on collective, collaborative, robust, common assessments of our students' progress." WCHP also identifies the "need for direct and indirect measures of assessment." As a new college, CDM also continues to refine its assessment system, create assessment measures, and begin collecting data. This shows the valuable awareness that good assessment demands constant evaluation.

6. The reporting entities that did not show in their reports an effort to "close the loop" and remedy their challenges, or those that reported they are meeting student learning outcomes without identifying any need for improvement efforts, need training on writing the annual reports to convey their efforts at assessing their student learning outcomes and/or more training on assessment itself. The *Annual Program Improvement and Assessment Report* does not have a question that specifically asks programs, "What changes do you plan to make as a result of this assessment data?" which would be more relevant for newly discovered challenges than the current question on the report, "What improvements have been made in your program so far as a result of the assessment process?" Rewording the question could help programs provide clearer responses on both the changes they have implemented and the changes they plan to implement as a

result of assessment. Some programs seem to have in place a process to resolve their challenges, and yet they did not express those efforts in their reports.

7. Many programs report that they need to improve students' communication skills. CAS states, "The strongest impression left by multiple faculty assessors is that the University needs to do better in developing *communication skills*. This includes written and oral expression, as well as the development of coherent arguments backed by evidence." CDM agrees, writing, "Faculty and staff have noticed that written communication (basic grammar and punctuation, clarity of expression, organization of thought, etc.) is a marked weakness for many of our students." CDM suggests developing a "university-wide writing seminar required for first-year dental, medical, pharmacy, etc. students." CGPS adds, "UNE students should be effective communicators, especially in writing, be able to demonstrate and apply math and statistical computational skills, and be capable of applying information and skills learned in the classroom to real world situations."

8. Professionalism and associated behaviors in students were often cited as skills needing improvement. In some programs, professionalism includes the soft skills of emotional intelligence and personal behavior. Student Affairs adds to this list resiliency, self-advocacy, and perseverance. Student Affairs has recently implemented training in professional competencies into the Resident Advisor and student employee training. The division has also launched a focus on positive psychology principles as a framework for its work with students. WCHP stresses the need to develop students' "'soft skills' of social and emotional intelligence that are integral to student success. These include professional behaviors, compassion, ethics, civility, team work, cultural sensitivity, and caring." Assessing personal behaviors and professionalism has its own challenges and is currently receiving a lot of attention in health profession education. Perhaps programs struggling in these essential areas could work together to determine effective ways of teaching professionalism and related skills as well as how to measure student growth in these areas.

9. Finally, although the reports centered on assessment of student learning outcomes, the UAC has agreed that pedagogy is also an integral component of a program's overall quality and educational effectiveness. Faculty preparedness, teaching resources, and class enrollment, for example, do not directly deal with student learning outcomes, but they affect student learning. WCHP explains, "I am pleased we are focusing resources to expand the simulation space in the Armory in Portland. This will benefit all of the colleges." The UAC thus concludes that UNE's assessment process should not focus on student learning outcomes to the exclusion of other relevant factors, such as curriculum development, pedagogical practices, and student support services. After all, actions to address the improvement of student learning often include delivery solutions.

Recommendations for Action

After reviewing all of the program and college and division reports, the UAC makes the following recommendations:

1. Assist programs to use the reporting process to develop consensus among their faculty/staff on what is working and what is not working in assessment, and to develop student learning outcome goals that raise the bar for student learning.

2. Provide more training on assessment and assistance in preparing the reports, identifying the measures to use for assessment, and then offering ideas on the ways in which to use the results to implement improvements.

3. For the academic year 2015-2016, invite additional non-academic divisions in the assessment process.

4. Convene an ad hoc university-wide task force on improving UNE students' written communication skills that includes voluntary representatives to share strategies that have been working and to design new strategies to implement moving forward. Improving communication skills demands multiple approaches within colleges/divisions and programs, and efforts should be embedded at multiple points in the curriculum. University-wide awareness of the issue is important.

5. Similarly, a university-wide task force could examine shared successes and challenges in teaching and assessing professional and personal behavioral skills, because multiple programs consider these skills essential student learning outcomes. The UAC also recommends making available an assessment expert in this area to provide strategies and other resources.