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**Assessing an Institution's Outcomes Assessment Efforts:
The Application of the HLC/NCA Assessment Matrix by Three Institutions**

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Introduction

A successful outcomes assessment program requires a long-term view and commitment. Therefore, it is necessary to have a process in place that insures progress toward those long-term goals. As coordinators for outcomes assessment efforts at the institutional level, we have struggled with how to assess the progress of outcomes assessment at that level. This assessment of institutional progress is necessary for not only reporting to HLC/NCA but to insure institutional assessment efforts have not stalled and determine how to further enhance those efforts. Specifically, the different kinds of issues we have encountered include:

- How can we ascertain whether the institution is making progress in its assessment of student learning?
- How can we effectively communicate the progress of our outcomes assessment efforts/effects with accrediting agencies?
- How can we assess assessment at the institutional level to model a "culture of evidence"?
- How can we analyze assessment reports received from individual units (i.e. college, academic departments, etc.) to better understand the contribution and progress of outcomes assessment at our institution?
- How can we draft an institutional report about outcomes assessment that is a critical analysis rather than a summary of activities?

In this session, three institutions will share how they have attempted to address these issues by using the HLC/NCA's *Assessment Matrix* (formerly known as the *Levels of Implementation*)¹ as a guide.

Background

The *Assessment Matrix* is an addendum to the HLC/NCA's *Handbook for Accreditation*. It was designed to "assist institutions in understanding and strengthening their programs for assessment" (p. 15). The matrix consists of two dimensions: three levels of implementation by four patterns of characteristics. The three levels of implementation are: "Beginning Implementation of Assessment Programs," "Making Progress in Implementing Assessment Programs," and "Maturing Stages of Continuous Improvement." The four patterns are Institutional Culture, Shared Responsibility, Institutional Support, and Efficacy of Assessment. It is assumed that these patterns are dynamic and fluid across an institution and build upon one another. Institutional Culture focuses on collective/shared values and mission. Institutional Support involves the resources and administrative structures for the outcomes assessment process. Shared Responsibility emphasizes the importance of assessment being a faculty-owned process that involves students with strong administrative support. Efficacy of Assessment encompasses the totality of all assessment efforts. Within each pattern for each level of implementation, benchmark descriptors of progress are provided that allow for documentation of progress over time. These descriptors emerged from analysis of content found in team reports and therefore are to serve descriptive rather than definitive "markers of the progress institutions have made in developing their assessment programs" (p. 15).

¹ NCA/ The Higher Learning Commission, "Chapter Reference A: Assessment of Student Academic Achievement: Levels of Implementation." Addendum to the *Handbook of Accreditation*. Second Edition. March 2001, updated March 2002.

For each of our three institutions, these levels aided in framing vital assessment characteristics. However, each institution identified how the *Assessment Matrix* could be applied given our unique campus cultures and the maturity of assessment efforts at each university. As the following three descriptions illustrate, each university applies the *Assessment Matrix* in ways most suitable for its culture and structure.

University of Nebraska – Lincoln

At the time the *Assessment Matrix* was first released in 2000, our institution had just completed an HLC/NCA institutional focus visit on assessment. Although the focus team found UNL had a strong structure and strong support for outcomes assessment, they requested a progress report in two years on how the assessment process was contributing to the improvement of student learning. Consequently, the fourth pattern of characteristics, “Efficacy of Assessment,” held particular interest for us.

Because UNL is a highly decentralized institution, most assessment efforts occur at the level of the academic unit. Thus, we needed to find a way to communicate our progress as a whole rather than through the great variety of differences that occurred across academic units. The descriptions for “Efficacy of Assessment” assisted us in moving toward this bigger picture, but we determined we needed to identify an additional level of detail that would help us measure the extent to which we were achieving the characteristics described. Therefore, we applied the framework for “Efficacy of Assessment” by identifying seven indicators that paralleled the descriptions for this pattern of characteristic but also represented what our institution valued about outcomes assessment.

Once we had identified the seven indicators, UNL decided to capitalize on the wealth of information provided in annual assessment reports from academic units in a more formal and systematic way. Annual reports were a natural fit for use in collecting information about the seven indicators because as the reporting process evolved past mere development of outcomes assessment plans, we began to ask academic units to focus on two questions:

1. How has the outcomes assessment process and evidence informed decision making?
2. How has the outcomes assessment process led (or will lead) to the improvement of your educational program?

Therefore, the number and content of the annual reports were analyzed to collect information relevant to the seven indicators so that progress on each for the institution as a whole could be tracked.

For example, one characteristic for “Efficacy of Assessment” is increased engagement among academic units and faculty in the collection and use of assessment results. To assess our progress on this characteristic we would review an academic unit’s assessment report and make a determination about the extent of the impact of unit’s outcomes assessment activities on their academic program(s). This impact is analyzed at four levels representing increasing levels of engagement with the assessment process. The four levels are:

- modification to assessment plans,
- discussion of programmatic issues highlighted by assessment activities,
- consideration of actions to improve student learning, and
- actions taken to improve student learning.

By annually determining the percentage of units engaged in the assessment process at each level, we could determine whether assessment efforts were increasing the level of contribution over time. It also allowed us to recognize the impact of initial assessment efforts since much of what was learned in the beginning was about the assessment process itself.

Through the tracking of information on these indicators each year, we obtained a sense of contributions made to outcomes assessment efforts and whether those contributions were increasing each year. We started tracking this information in 1999 and have used it to enhance communication internally concerning our progress through UNL’s annual outcomes assessment reports as well as external evidence for our HLC/NCA Progress Report due December 2002. Indirectly, the collection of information has assisted in clarifying expectations for assessment efforts and substantiating the contribution of outcomes assessment for those who question its value. How we documented each of the seven indicators can be found in the appendices of the 2000 and 2001 annual assessment reports at <http://www.unl.edu/svcaa/priorities/assessment.html>.

Oklahoma State University

At Oklahoma State University (OSU), all academic programs are required by the State Regents to have an outcomes assessment plan and submit annual reports demonstrating their assessment efforts. The university’s Assessment Office and faculty Assessment Council guide university-level assessments and also provide

information and financial resources to academic programs to assist in developing effective program-level outcomes assessment. After a flurry of outcomes assessment activity following the initial implementation of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education Assessment Policy in 1993-1994, outcomes assessment in many programs slowed or stalled. A review of the outcomes assessment reports submitted by academic programs from 1995 through 1999 showed that effective outcomes assessment was inconsistent, or inconsistently reported, among academic programs and only a handful of programs demonstrated the type of progress articulated in the HLC/NCA's *Assessment Matrix*.

Dissemination of the HLC/NCA's *Assessment Matrix* encouraged the OSU Assessment Council to undertake peer-review of outcomes assessment and work towards helping programs meet outcomes assessment expectations. The *Assessment Matrix* provided a framework that the Council used to develop its own scoring criteria appropriate for evaluating each academic unit's assessment documents (plans and annual reports) as well as to provide constructive feedback concerning areas for improvement. The *Assessment Matrix* also states that "coaching and facilitating" (p. 25) was expected of the faculty Assessment Committee, which added strength and momentum to the review process.

Every academic unit is reviewed every three years, and each review focuses on the program's assessment plan and annual reports. The Assessment Office and the Assessment Council conduct the outcomes reviews jointly. The Assessment Office coordinates the logistics of the process and summarizes results for each program while small teams of Council members conduct the reviews. The review criteria do not directly use the language of the HLC/NCA *Assessment Matrix* but are based on principles described in that document (e.g., articulation of 'assessable' student learning outcomes, use of direct and indirect assessment methods, use of assessment results for program development, etc.). The reviews emphasize the importance of helpful and constructive feedback, and follow-up information is provided to programs that request assistance.

Reviews have been conducted since 2000, and the process has been successful in a number of ways. The reviews have provided a valuable opportunity for communicating basic assessment information and articulating what programs should be doing; faculty members relate that they appreciate the feedback. About 75% of programs have developed new assessment plans or demonstrated greater commitment to program outcomes assessment in their annual reports after the reviews began. The Assessment Council members themselves have become more aware of best practices in assessment, and the experience has enabled them to become more effective assessment leaders for our campus. Overall, the development of these reviews has been a critical step in moving the institution towards better assessment practices and improved assessment awareness.

Information related to this process (copies of the evaluation forms and results summaries) will be provided at the presentation or can be viewed at www.okstate.edu/assess/council.

Eastern Illinois University

Like the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Oklahoma State University, Eastern Illinois University found the HLC/NCA's *Assessment Matrix* particularly useful at the institutional level for identifying the progress of assessment efforts and for developing a shared language when reporting to internal and external constituencies. As our assessment efforts moved from assessment of General Education, an institution-wide effort, to the program and departmental levels, we found that we could adapt the Matrix for use at this more specific level. The Matrix aided in cutting across discipline-specific barriers in order to develop a reporting process and feedback loop suitable for all academic departments and comprehensible by all constituencies.

Like many institutions, Eastern began its assessment efforts at the institutional level with a faculty committee focused examining our mission and our General Education to develop learning outcome goals for all our graduates. The impetus for this focus on assessment came from the 1995 "Report of a Visit to EIU" from the NCA team, who noted that "the campus has lost its early leadership edge and momentum in assessment activities. Specific steps must be taken to ensure full implementation of assessment plans with a clear focus on student learning outcomes."

Once an institution-wide assessment plan was established, it became clear that discussions similar to the ones that had taken place at the institution-level would be needed at the program level in order to encourage faculty to include assessment as part of the major and minor programs. Levels of implementation were varied by college and discipline. Support and development opportunities were needed to provide advice and a framework for faculty to organize, develop, and execute assessment plans based on student outcomes that could be embedded in established programs or used in the creation of new programs.

In academic year 1999-2000 academic departments were asked to complete Departmental Assessment

Summaries; these Summaries ask department chairs or assessment coordinators/teams to complete the following five sections:

- Program (Major/ Minor/Concentration) Objectives
- Assessment Measures (who, what, where, and how assessed)
- Program Expectations for Students' Learning Objectives
- Results from the Current Academic Year
- Description of the Feedback Loop and How Results Will be Used

All graduate and undergraduate programs at Eastern were required to submit a summary to the Vice President for Academic Affairs. With a formal reporting structure in place, many departments were encouraged to create faculty-driven assessment committees or to turn to their departmental curriculum committees for discussions on major/minor objectives.

To help departments with this effort, the Committee for the Assessment of Student Learning (CASL) shared the *Assessment Matrix* with departments to encourage self-reflection, shared responsibility, and greater analysis at the department level concerning progress with assessing student learning outcomes. However, while CASL had found the Matrix useful in creating a University-wide assessment plan, the departments experienced difficulties with adapting institutional criteria to their work at the major/minor levels. To aid in their assessment efforts, a form using primary trait analysis was developed for departments; this tool provided criteria by level, criteria corresponding to the categories reported for departmental assessment reports. In turn, those categories corresponded to the steps to creating assessment plans and developing a culture of assessment. The Assessment Office provides feedback on a Response Form to each department on its summaries with advice on ways to improve efforts; this feedback includes information on where each department falls in terms of the levels of implementation. (Copies of all these forms will be disseminated at the presentation or can be viewed at http://www.eiu.edu/~assess/departmental_assessment_plans.htm.)

The Response Form encourages dialogue within departments as chairs, coordinators, and assessment committees share the feedback with the rest of the faculty. The format also increases communication between those charged with providing support for assessment efforts and the faculty who develop assessment objectives and measures for their students. While departments are still at varying levels of maturity in terms of assessing student learning outcomes, the information gleaned from the Summaries offers the institution a way to monitor its progress for its internal and external constituencies while also providing useful information that serves as an impetus to further discussion and shared responsibility and values.

Summation

The NLC/NCA *Assessment Matrix* has enhanced the development of effective assessment at all three institutions, yet interesting parallels and differences exist in our uses of the Matrix. At each institution, the Matrix was used to evaluate and enhance outcomes assessment reporting practices in academic units and make inferences concerning the overall status of outcomes assessment at the university level. At University of Nebraska – Lincoln, the institution's assessment office employed Matrix concepts to review department's outcomes assessment reports and used the review results to evaluate the university-wide status of outcomes assessment. At Oklahoma State University, the assessment office and faculty Assessment Committee conducted similar reviews, and these reviews also provided an overview of outcomes assessment at the university-level, but the focus of the OSU reviews was to provide feedback at the department-level. Eastern Illinois University started by using the Matrix information to establish and assess outcomes assessment processes at the university-level and then used this approach to guide outcomes assessment at the department level. To varying degrees, each institution uses criteria developed from the concepts in the *Assessment Matrix* to assess efforts at the department and university levels. Further, each institution employs the Matrix as a tool to communicate assessment expectations to faculty and facilitate quality outcomes assessment.