

12-1996

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Assessment of Student Learning Committee

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Assessment of Student Learning Committee. 144.
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A Progress Report on the Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning

University of Minnesota, Morris

Morris, Minnesota

December , 1996

The Context for Planning

The University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) is an undergraduate, residential, liberal arts campus of the University of Minnesota with about 2000 students and 120 teaching faculty located in a rural community 150 miles west of the Twin Cities. It offers the academic reputation of the University of Minnesota with the special atmosphere of a small college. Its primary institutional mission is to offer undergraduate education in the liberal arts including licensure programs in teacher education. This mission as a single purpose liberal arts college has not changed since the college was founded in 1960 and reflects its historic values, current strengths, and plans for the future.

Evaluation, appraisal, and assessment of the quality of courses, programs, and services has been practiced at the University of Minnesota, Morris for years. With an active institutional research program, it was clear that substantial outcome-oriented evaluation was already taking place including longitudinal profiling of the student body as a whole, student opinion surveys, follow-up studies of graduates and non-returning students, and analysis of graduation and retention rates. Students evaluate every course. A detailed evaluation of the general education program was recently completed and many disciplines appraised the competency of their majors through cap-stone seminars, tutorials, portfolios, and recitals. *Some of the current activities related with the assessment of students' learning are given in the appendix.1*

The campus is doing a great deal, but these efforts fell short in important ways. For example, the goals of general education and the majors are not directly evaluated through student outcomes, i.e., that students demonstrate that they have acquired the skills, techniques, and knowledge required. Even less frequently are the assessment techniques related directly to well articulated curricular objectives. The results of the assessment efforts that are not tied into institutional planning and resource allocation as directly as they should be. Perhaps most important, the results of assessment are not systematically used to improve student learning in a regular, ongoing way.

To overcome some of these shortcomings in the college's assessment activities, a task force made up of faculty and students representative of the governance committees with a major stake in assessment (and supported by staff familiar with the current institutional research efforts), worked during the spring of 1995 to develop a plan specifically to assess student learning across the campus. The group's principal objective was to develop a conceptual model for the assessment which would be generally applicable at each level where student learning and achievement take place. These levels would include the course; the discipline curriculum and major; the general education program and its

components; several support programs such as academic assistance, honors, study abroad; and some of the educational, social, and recreational programs of the extracurriculum. The conceptual model was to unify the assessment process across units, in each case beginning with the institutional mission, moving to unit goals and objectives, then to the assessment and analysis phase leading to appropriate action at the individual, unit, or institutional level as the case may be. The process would be controlled through the governance system by the faculty. In addition, rather than an intrusive chore imposed by an outside agency, the process ought to be compatible with the natural responsibilities of faculty members committed to teaching and research in their respective disciplines. *After the receipt of reviewer's reports on the proposed plan which ask for revisions, a second task force has been appointed by UMM Campus assembly in the Fall of 1996. The second task force made up of two faculty representatives from Science and Mathematics, Social Science, and Humanities divisions and one faculty from Education Division who were nominated by the divisions, two students, and the Dean of Academic Affairs. The task force has been charged to review the draft UMM Assessment Plan, bring it back to Assembly with any revisions that seem necessary, and take steps to begin the implementation of the plan, fulfilling the duties of the proposed Assessment of Student Learning Committee until its establishment.*

The Assessment of Student Learning is a discipline and program-based process aimed at improving the teaching and learning at UMM. It is intended to determine how well what students are actually learning conforms to the objectives of that academic enterprise. Although the assessment process will produce a body of information which will be useful in the preparation of discipline and institutional self-studies, the primary purpose is program improvement. Further, it is the intention of the both task forces that, as a matter of policy, this assessment process should not bear a connection to the college's faculty evaluations for the purposes of promotion, tenure, and salary determination.

The Institutional Mission and Goals

Explicit statements of the institutional mission, goals, and educational objectives are contained in the *1995-97 UMM Bulletin*. The formal mission statement, approved by the Campus Assembly in 1993, is as follows:

The mission of the University of Minnesota, Morris as an undergraduate, residential liberal arts college is distinctive within the University of Minnesota. The Morris campus shares the University's statewide mission of teaching, research, and outreach, yet it is a small college where students can shape their own education. The campus serves undergraduate students primarily from Minnesota and its neighboring states, and it is an educational resource and cultural center for citizens of west central Minnesota. Through its instructional excellence, its commitment to research, its numerous extracurricular programs and services, and its strong sense of community, the University of Minnesota, Morris endeavors to achieve its place among the best liberal arts colleges in the region.

Goals of the Curriculum

The goals of the academic program at the University of Minnesota, Morris are expressed through the requirements for the bachelor of arts degree. The degree requirements consist of three parts, two of which are in general education: *Process Requirements* and *Expanding Perspectives Requirements*. The third part is the Major, or field of specialization; its requirements are specified by faculty in each discipline (*1995-97 UMM Bulletin*, p. 56). The requirements are meant to prescribe student competencies, which are usually demonstrated through the successful completion of qualifying courses but may be met by demonstrating proficiency in other ways.

The first goal of general education is to become familiar with the process of liberal learning--to acquire the intellectual skills, the communication skills, and the framework of knowledge needed for successful advanced work. The second goal is to expand one's intellectual perspectives, gaining enough understanding of the principal areas of human endeavor to be able to continue learning in the future and to have a sense of the limits of one's knowledge. Successful study in a major field, in which one pursues knowledge in depth with the goal of becoming reasonably expert, constitutes the third area required for the B.A. degree.

Process of Liberal Learning

The *Process* requirements emphasize the development of intellectual skills, the critical and creative thinking skills, and the communication skills needed for future work. The goals of the process requirements are as follows.

- *Inquiry*, a freshman core course. Introduces students to liberal education; students are expected to gain a sense of community, develop skills of intellectual inquiry, and learn to be active participants in the learning process.
- *College Writing*. Students acquire the basic compositional skills necessary to develop multi-paragraph essays and to write documented papers. Following the introductory course, students develop and apply expository writing skills appropriate to various disciplines.
- *Speaking*. Students develop the skills and understandings necessary to prepare and deliver effective oral presentations before an audience. Students then learn to apply these skills in oral presentations appropriate in various disciplines.
- *Computing*. Students learn to understand the role of computers in society, know how to solve problems using a computer, and how to make productive use of computers to enhance their knowledge and skills in a chosen field.
- *Foreign Language*. Students are introduced to the grammar, the basic skills of reading, writing, and speaking a language other than their own, and to the cultures of the countries speaking that language.

The *Expanding Perspectives* requirements emphasize the development of breadth in a world of diverse peoples, activities, and values, all increasingly related. All Expanding Perspective courses are intended to actively involve students in the following: understanding how knowledge is acquired, engaging in the process of acquiring knowledge, understanding the influences and assumptions that lead to particular perspectives in a given field, engaging in critical and creative thinking and inquiry appropriate to the field, and pursuing connections to knowledge in other disciplines. The goals of specific Expanding Perspectives requirements are as follows.

- *The Self and Others*. To encourage the development of self-understanding and an understanding of the forces which shape human interactions.
- *Historical Perspectives*. To provide an understanding of the past, the complexity of human affairs, and the way in which various forces--economic, cultural, religious, political, scientific--influence efforts to control the course of these events.
- *Different Cultures*. To introduce students to a culture other than their own.
- *Social Institutions*. To develop an understanding of a method for analyzing modern society or some significant political, economic, religious, social, or scientific component of it.
- *Analysis and Interpretation of the Arts*. To develop an understanding of the principles of aesthetic judgment, including the means for analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the arts produced by others.
- *Performance*. To introduce students to the creative process through individual performance in an artistic activity such as writing, acting, dance, studio art, and music.
- *Arts and Culture*. To investigate how cultures shape and are shaped by the arts.
- *The Natural World*. To acquaint students with the scientific method as a means of studying the natural world through understanding fundamental scientific concepts and through engaging in scientific analysis and experimentation.
- *Abstract Systems*. To learn to formulate abstractions, employ proofs, and manipulate symbols in formal systems; to use abstract languages with defined rules of deduction to strengthen the student's ability to think logically.

The Major

The purpose of the major is to ensure that each student pursues a particular field of knowledge in depth, investigates advanced theories and schools of thought, and becomes competent in using the language and methods of inquiry of the

field. Through such concentrated study, conducted over an extended period of time, a student begins to master an existing body of knowledge and understands the nature of expertise in the chosen field, including both its power and its limitations. Each of 27 formally approved majors have certain specific goals defined by the faculty of the disciplines involved.

The Conceptual Framework for the Assessment of Student Learning

As designed by the task force, the conceptual model consists of unit assessment cycles as well as an institutional assessment cycle. Units include the course, the discipline curriculum, the major, the general education curriculum or its components, and other programs--for example, Study Abroad--where significant student learning has been identified (*a detailed list of units is given in appendix*)¹. The overall institutional cycle aims to provide feedback among units to assist them in identifying overlapping student learning needs, and to integrate the results of individual unit assessments. The conceptual framework not only allows the unit assessment cycles to flow from the institution's published mission and goals, but it also creates channels to identify necessary changes in institutional goals.

The key ingredient of the model is the Unit Assessment Cycle, given in Figure 1, which consists of seven elements.

- Unit Goal/Mission
- Learning Objectives
- Expected Outcomes
- Assessment Methods and Tools
- Observed Outcomes
- Action
- Impact on the Students' Learning

The cycle may be further divided into a planning phase and an application phase. The planning phase (the right-hand side of the diagram) consists of the determination of learning objectives, the clarification of expected outcomes, and selection and development of assessment methods and tools. The application phase (the left-hand side of the diagram) consists of the observation of the outcomes resulting from the application of the assessment methods, taking actions based on these results, and analyzing the impact on the students' learning of the action(s) taken.

The cycle originates with the unit's goal/mission and returns to this stage as the cycle is completed. Through various actions taken by a unit, the cycle interconnects with cycles from other units and with the institutional assessment cycle as a whole. Since the model cycle will be employed by all the units, the assessment process will be consistent across the campus. In addition, the similarity among assessment cycles will have the beneficial effect of providing multiple measures of effectiveness of the academic program as a whole. Rather than impose a new approach upon units, it is intended that the cycle provides a conceptual framework for assessment which is compatible with appraisals currently being carried out in most units in an informal way.

Unit Goal/Mission

The cycle begins with a statement of the mission and goals particular to that unit. While they should be compatible with the institutional mission, the unit goals may be quite specific and initially may not take into consideration the mission and goals of other units. The institutional assessment cycle is designed to integrate the goal and mission of all units. Even if it is not true at the beginning, this dynamic process will in time integrate unit and institutional goals.

Learning Objectives

Learning objectives will flow from the unit's mission and goals and will be detailed enough to cover the different functions of the unit. Based upon the unit's goals, an individual instructor for a course, or the discipline faculty in the case of a major, will identify the specific learning objectives. They may be as specific as those for a particular course

(for example, understanding a cost/benefit analysis) or as general as those for the major (for example, provide students with a basic understanding of the nature and functioning of the economic system).

Expected Outcomes

Units must next specify, based upon their learning objectives, a variety of expected outcomes, measurable in qualitative or quantitative terms. Depending upon the unit's goals, the expected outcomes may be stated as cognitive, behavioral, or attitudinal characteristics. The outcomes can be as specific as being able to solve differential equations, being able to integrate trigonometric functions, or being able to interpret the results of a factor analysis, or as broad as being able to explain how the development of mathematics has been part of the evolution of civilizations and is intimately interwoven with their cultural and scientific development. At this stage in the assessment cycle the expected outcomes represent *predictions* of how student learning will be demonstrated.

Assessment Methods and Tools

Each unit will select or develop its own assessment methods and tools. Assessment methods may be based on observational or experimental data collection processes. These methods will include portions of examinations in key courses, the products of capstone experiences, seminars, recitals, locally-developed examinations, surveys, oral examinations, professional licensure examinations, standardized comprehensive examinations, portfolios, alumni follow-up surveys, and the like (please see the Figure 4).

Different units may select and develop differing assessment methods and tools to measure the same or similar expected outcomes. This will have the advantage of creating multiple assessment measures more likely to capture the complete range of student achievements and promote innovative and "better" assessment techniques as their results are shared during the assessment cycles with other units.

Observed Outcomes

When the assessment method, tools, and techniques have been utilized with the appropriate students, the results will be analyzed by the unit itself and interpreted in terms of the expected outcomes identified earlier during the planning phase. The results will become part of one or more assessment outcome documents. These may include discipline or program self-study reports, annual discipline/division/committee reports, institutional data summaries, accreditation self-study reports.

Action

Neither the process of appraisal nor knowledge of the results automatically leads to constructive change and improvement. The assessment model must include an action stage, providing for an appropriate response to the results of the assessment of student achievement. The most direct action, and that which routinely occurs at the present time, is for the results to be provided to students and used in improving their achievement. Action may occur as the modification by faculty of a course or a discipline curriculum, or by a governance committee of a program or administrative unit. In particular, the assessment process must, as a matter of policy, influence the institution's decision making processes which determine curriculum, pedagogy, and resource allocation. At the action stage, as shown in Figure 2, the cycle provides for sharing recommendations for change based upon documented results of the assessment process.

Impact on the Students' Learning

Once an action has been taken to improve student achievement, its impact will be evaluated to see whether the desired improvement actually occurred. If the proposed action requires a higher unit's involvement that impact should be measured and evaluated as well. Note that this stage might call for the application of the assessment tools developed in a previous stage. It may also lead to a change in the unit's mission and goal.

Back to the Unit Goal/Mission

One of the outcomes of unit assessment will often be a modification of that unit's statement of missions and goals. An

Assessment Committee (see below) will both guide the process and act as a clearinghouse for information and recommendations which emerge from the unit assessment cycles. One of its responsibilities will be to provide information to other units, appropriate governance committees, the administration, and the Campus Assembly, which may result in modifications of units or institutional goals.

Administration of the Assessment Process

The assessment of student learning is ultimately a faculty responsibility. The assessment process is to be faculty designed and supervised, with a committee of the Campus Assembly having major responsibility for the program. *On November 18, 1996, the UMM Assessment plan and a constitutional By-law amendment proposal establishing the Assessment of Student Learning Committee was presented to the Campus assembly by the Executive Committee for information. The By-law amendment proposal is given below:*

By-law Amendment Proposal

Rationale: In keeping with its effort to fulfill its educational mission, UMM seeks to implement a process whereby assessment of student learning occurs in an ongoing manner at every appropriate level and informs the development of educational policy and practice. A standing committee is necessary to assure that this process operates effectively. This committee will help UMM meet Criteria Three from the NCA Accreditation standards.

Membership: The Assessment of Student Learning Committee consists of ten members, including one faculty member from the Division of Education, and two each from the Divisions of Humanities, Science & Mathematics, and Social Sciences, and two students. The Dean or his designee will serve ex officio.

Powers: The Assessment of Student Learning Committee oversees and provides support to all aspects of the assessment process, receives all data and materials generated by assessment activities, recommends improvements in the assessment program and disseminates reports on the results of assessment and the initiatives based on assessment intended to improve student learning.

Technical restraints within the UMM Constitution prevent the operation of a new standing committee until the next academic year. To allow the process to move forward this academic year, the Executive Committee recommended to the Campus Assembly the creation of a second Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning. It solicited nominations for membership from the Division chairs and then forwarded a slate to the Campus Assembly. The Assembly approved the recommendation and selected the membership for the Task Force at its meeting of November 18, 1996. The immediate duties of the Task Force are to review the 1995 Assessment Plan in light of the NCA referee critique and other relevant information, to consult with the faculty and appropriate committees in its review of the plan and bring an Assessment Plan to the Campus Assembly for its approval in February, 1997. The Task Force, in carrying the responsibilities of the forthcoming Standing Committee, will also guide the development and implementation of the assessment process, facilitate unit involvement, provide relevant results to the other governance committees (Curriculum, General Education, Campus resources and Planning, and Scholastic are the most germane) and recommend necessary actions to the Campus Assembly. The relevant portions of the agenda of the November 18, 1996 Campus assembly are in the appendix.

Proposed structure of the administration of the assessment process and the place of the Assessment Committee is given in Figure 5.1

At the present time, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Dean is responsible for much of the institutional research, evaluation, and appraisal which occurs on the Morris Campus. This activity will continue, since it plays an essential role in resource allocation and in appraising institutional effectiveness for self studies and accreditation reviews. For this reason, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs will coordinate and provide support for the Committee for the Assessment of Student Learning. *On November, 1996 the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs named Engin Sungur, Associate Professor of Mathematics, as Interim Director of Assessment.*

Timetable for Implementation

A detailed timeline for the first cycle of the assessment process is given in the following table. The first cycle includes stages such as organization, planning, application, dissemination, and overall assessment of the assessment of students' learning process. The organization stage consists of activities which will maximize the faculty involvement and create an atmosphere which will make the assessment a crucial part of the institutions academic culture. One of the key activities at this stage is the Assessment of Students' Learning Planning Exercise and Survey II (a copy of the survey is included in the Appendix). In November the Task Force on Assessment of Students' Learning designed and start implementing a series of assessment planning exercises and surveys. The objectives of these exercises and surveys are to:

- *clarify some of the concepts in assessment of the student learning;*
- *present expectations from the units related with assessment;*
- *motivate units;*
- *initiate a discussion on assessment;*
- *increase faculty involvement and awareness on assessment;*
- *determine some of the assessment activities that are already taking place at UMM;*
- *determine the areas of the assessment with which the units do not feel comfortable;*
- *produce examples of unit assessment cycles that can be shared with other units;*
- *set up connections between different units by clarifying their expectations of each other;*
- *learn how the units are planning to disseminate the results so that the required channels can be opened and be available when needed;*
- *get input from the faculty on the possible functions of the future assessment committee.*

The Task Force is planning to use the results of the assessment planning exercises and surveys to:

- *select some of the responses and ask the units to present them in a meeting(such as Talking about Teaching)*
- *send the response of a unit to a related unit to increase communication, (note that on the survey units will tell with which other units they would like to share the results). The general education part of the responses, for example, can be sent to the general education committee;*
- *prepare a document for the assessment activities in progress and get more detailed information from the units to include on our plan;*
- *design workshops on the areas with which units feel uncomfortable;*
- *provide literature and examples on the areas with which the units feel uncomfortable;*
- *revise the guidelines based on the results;*
- *determine the functions of the assessment committee based on the responses;*
- *group units that have similar objectives and planning to use similar assessment techniques;*
- *prepare a report on the results and distribute to the all units. This will produce examples and knowledge based generated from us (UMM);*
- *include the survey and its results on the plan;*
- *keep track of how the unit responses will change throughout time;*
- *determine a time table for the assessment based on the results.*

At the next stage each unit will develop their assessment plan based on the guidelines that will be developed by the Assessment Committee and submit them to the Committee by March, 1997. The unit assessment plans reviewed by the Task Force on Assessment and other related committees will shape the details of the UMM Assessment Plan.1 Some preliminary results of the assessment from the units will be available by the end of October, 1997. With this, the dissemination stage of the process will begin. The assessment results will be disseminated across the units and the Committee will help to move the results through the appropriate channels so that substantial impact on the improvement of the students' learning can take place and appropriate input for the campus planning and resource allocation can be generated.

The last stage of the first cycle is the overall assessment of the UMM Assessment of Students' Learning Process. The Task Force (after the approval of the Campus Assembly, the Assessment of Students' Learning Committee) will also work on the unit assessment cycle and develop a goal/mission, learning objectives, expected outcomes, and assessment methods and tools to assess the overall effectiveness of the assessment process. This unit will determine the problems,

discuss successes and failures, provide evidence on impact of the process on the students' learning, and most important of all will carry out an academic cost/benefit analysis. A report on the overall assessment of the process will be prepared and distributed to the faculty and all other related units including the NCA.

The following cycles will include planning revision and updating, application, dissemination, and overall assessment of the process stages. The length of each cycle will be proposed by the Committee based on the inputs from the units' experiences on the first cycle.

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