In this issue:

**Principles of Good Practice**

**SHARPEN YOUR PENCIL**

What an accrediting commission should reasonably expect of an institution:

1. **Role of student learning in accreditation.** Educational quality is one of the core purposes of the institution, and the institution defines quality by how well it fulfills its declared learning mission.

2. **Documentation of student learning.** The institution demonstrates that student learning is appropriate for the certificate or degree awarded and is consistent with the institution’s own standards of academic performance. The institution accomplishes this by:
   a. setting clear learning goals, which speak to both content and level of attainment;
   b. collecting evidence of goal attainment using appropriate assessment tools;
   c. applying collective judgment as to the meaning and utility of the evidence; and
   d. using this evidence to effect improvements in its programs.

3. **Compilation of evidence.** Evidence of student learning is derived from multiple sources, such as courses, curricula, and co-curricular programming, and includes effects of both intentional and unintentional learning experiences. Evidence collected from these sources is complementary and portrays the impact on the student of the institution as a whole.

4. **Stakeholder involvement.** The collection, interpretation, and use of student learning evidence is a collective endeavor, and is not viewed as the sole responsibility of a single office or position. Those in the institution with a stake in decisions of educational quality participate in the process.

5. **Capacity building.** The institution uses broad participation in reflecting about student learning outcomes as a means of building a commitment to educational improvement.

- Adopted by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003
The Benefits of Learning Communities

In recent issues of Assessment Update (Volume 17 no. 1 & Volume 16 no. 6), Doane College and Temple University personnel discussed outcomes of instituting learning communities into their curriculum. Learning communities are a purposeful reorganization of curriculum to link together courses or coursework.

Maureen Franklin, vice president of academic affairs at Doane College, studied the relationship between learning communities, retention, and learning in first-year students. The learning communities program was evaluated one semester after it was initiated. Dr. Franklin found that:

- Learning community students received higher mean course grades than students not in the community
- All the students enrolled in learning communities returned to Doane for the next term
- There was a 95.6% retention rate of learning community students’ enrollment compared to 80.8% of students who were in one of the aligned courses but not in a learning community

Administrators from Temple University focused their study of the learning community program on the delivery of the program in the classroom and the degree to which students found it helpful. Students’ reasons for entering learning communities included:

- interested in courses as part of learning community
- support transition to college
- recommended by advisor
- convenient timing

Those who indicated their reason for registering for learning communities to be “interested in courses as part of learning community” felt “peer learning” and “socialization/communication” activities to be the most helpful. Students attracted to learning communities as a “support transition to college” felt that activities most beneficial to learning were socialization and communication.

PROFILES IN ASSESSMENT

Michael Coakley, Student Housing and Dining Services

As Assistant Vice President for Student Life, Michael Coakley provides oversight and leadership for the departments of Housing and Dining, Student Involvement and Leadership Development, and Commuter and Non-Traditional Student Services. Included in those new areas are Greek Affairs, parent services, leadership development, volunteerism, student organizational services, and campus activities. Michael’s background includes twenty-six years’ full-time experience in student development, housing operations, auxiliary services, residential life, judicial affairs and Greek Affairs administration. He has also served as an instructor and a clinical faculty member.

Click either picture, above, to hear Michael Coakley on assessment. Windows Media Player is necessary to view these files. Download Windows Media Player for free.
DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

Student Learning Outcomes Shape Assessment Plans

The Division of Student Affairs is revising its assessment program to magnify the focus on student learning. “You measure what’s most important,” says Dr. Donna M. Simon, assistant vice president for planning and resource management, “and our commitment to student learning is at the very core of our divisional mission.” Student satisfaction ratings and attendance numbers, the Division’s primary assessment targets of the past, are still important, according to Simon, but a new emphasis will be added to identify and assess the student learning and development that results from participation in Student Affairs’ programs and services.

The enhanced assessment strategy is founded on outcomes outlined in the monograph Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience (2004). Based on the Learning Reconsidered model, the Division has created a template to guide its assessment planning and reporting. “The template is really a modification of the rubric provided by the University Assessment Panel,” says Anne Barsch, assistant director for planning, who is meeting with departmental assessments coordinators over the next 12 months to assist with implementation of this new dimension of assessment. “This is really just a tweak in the assessment culture in Student Affairs,” says Simon, “but one that has enormous potential for improving our students’ academic experience. Making the assessment of student learning outcomes a priority reinforces the Division of Student Affairs’ commitment toward students’ success, and the significant results that can occur when we collaborate with our academic partners on student learning,” Simon explained.

“We will use the additional evidence gathered from this assessment component to improve student programs and services, as well as to create additional opportunities to collaborate with our faculty partners to expand student learning outside the classroom.”

Future editions of Toolkit will feature the Division’s progress in measuring student learning assessment. Look for highlights from several Student Affairs units.

“You measure what’s most important.”

—Dr. Donna M. Simon

Contributions Solicited!

Contribute to Toolkit’s newest feature, “Sharpen your Pencil: Assessment Tips from the Inside,” or any of our other regular features. We’re looking to share the wisdom that we each develop at home, making the work of assessment more productive. If you’d like material to be considered for inclusion in a future edition of Toolkit, submit a Word document of no more than 300 words as an email attachment to vcassidy@niu.edu.
Debunking NCATE Myths

- **NCATE Myth #1:** NCATE expects everyone at an institution being reviewed to be able to recite phrases, themes, and slogans from the unit’s conceptual framework.
- **NCATE Reality #1:** NCATE expects that the conceptual framework be collaboratively developed/revised and shared among stakeholders. NCATE expects unit administrators and professional education faculty members to be able to discuss the conceptual framework in detail. All stakeholders should understand the unit’s philosophy and the characteristics (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) of the educators the unit is trying to produce.
- **NCATE Myth #2:** Standard 1 requires an 80 percent pass rate on the content exams required for state licensing and none of the other data a unit might present for this standard are important.
- **NCATE Reality #2:** The 80 percent pass rate is a necessary but not sufficient component of Standard 1. The standard cannot be met without the 80 percent pass rate. It can only be met, however, with other candidate assessment data demonstrating that candidates have the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective educators.
- **NCATE Myth #3:** NCATE requires electronic portfolios and other expensive technological materials to meet Standard 2: Assessment Systems and Unit Evaluation.
- **NCATE Reality #3:** Standard 2 calls for the use of information technology in the maintenance of unit assessment systems. NCATE is not prescriptive about how institutions store and manipulate assessment data using information technology, as long as the data can be manipulated and used to make program improvements. NCATE does not require electronic portfolios.
- **NCATE Myth #4:** When it comes to providing opportunities for candidates to interact with diverse faculty, peers, and P-12 students, NCATE’s diversity standard refers only to diversity of race and ethnicity.
- **NCATE Reality #4:** The rubrics for the latter three elements of the diversity standard at the acceptable level identify, at a minimum, the diverse groups of individuals with which candidates should have opportunities to interact. These groups are groups for which data can be legally collected.
- **NCATE Myth #5:** NCATE BOE members have “unstated quotas” in mind when they evaluate institutions on candidate opportunities to interact with diverse faculty, diverse candidates, and diverse field placements.
- **NCATE Reality #5:** While NCATE affirms the need for candidates to have opportunities to work with diverse peers, faculty members, and P-12 students, NCATE does not endorse quotas. There is no magic number, nor percentage, nor percentage comparison when NCATE teams evaluate these elements. The UAB asks teams to report the types of diversity within units for contextual understanding. NCATE’s website includes all of the information any unit needs to know in order to become accredited. The information on the website includes an accreditation handbook, timelines, training modules which reveal what examiners know and are expected to do, templates, and presentations given by NCATE staff.

Look for five more myths in the next issue of Toolkit, or view them all now at www.ncate.org
PORTFOLIO CONFERENCE

Highlights from Kathleen Yancey’s Workshop

On Friday, March 4, the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center (FDIDC) hosted the Conference on Portfolio Integration: Connecting Learning and Assessment. Keynote speaker Kathleen Blake Yancey, R. Roy Pearce Professor of Professional Communication at Clemson University, dispensed a truckload of information regarding digital portfolios. For those considering embarking on such a course, she offered the following questions:

• Where will students do this work, and why?
• As program portfolios are developed, will they be “thematized” as artifacts of local culture?
• What effects will portfolios exert?
• Is there a relationship between electronic linking and cognitive linking? Does the kind of link matter?
• What difference does it make to ask a learner to create an interface?
• Does the way that we navigate a portfolio influence how we value it? Does design?
• Who is the digital composer, and what difference does that make?

Answering these questions should help guide the professoriate toward more successful outcomes.

In addition, Dr. Yancey provided several useful resources:

• Example of online career portfolios:
http://www.career-recruit.fsu.edu/careerportfolio/enter/login.html
• Samples of ePortfolios:
http://www.eportfolio.lagecc.cuny.edu/samples.html
• A general education learning matrix:
//eport.iu.edu/images/matrix_lg.gif
• Sample of a student portfolio:
www.stolaf.edu/depts/cis/wp/wernerb

Additional resources:


Electronic Portfolios Virtual Community of Practice (EPAC):
http://www.aahc.org/cop.htm (fifth topic down)

The National Research Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Learning, co-sponsored by AAHE and Clemson University’s Pearce Center: contact Barbara Cambridge bcambridge@aahe.org, or Kathleen Yancey kyancey@clemson.edu
DID YOU KNOW?
Undergraduate Alumni Survey Results

The Office of Assessment Services conducted NIU’s 2003 Undergraduate Degree Alumni Survey one year after the group’s graduation. Respondents felt positive about their education at NIU, stating that:

• in their degree major, professors were accessible outside of class (81%)
• in their degree major, professors’ expectations for the quality of student work was high (80%)
• they thought the amount of time it took to complete their degree was reasonable (95%)

Alumni were also pleased with how NIU prepared them for life after graduation. They indicated:

• that their overall university experience and courses were helpful in developing an understanding of how their personality, skills and abilities fit well into their chosen major/field (92%)
• that their overall university experience and courses were helpful in developing the ability to think analytically — making logical inferences, and reaching correct conclusions (95%)
• that their degree prepared them for their present job (90%)

Perhaps not surprisingly, 94 percent of survey respondents expressed a positive attitude toward their degree major. Over 90 percent stated they would recommend NIU to family and friends. Finally, 95 percent indicated a positive attitude toward NIU.

FROM THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION
New Accreditation Criteria Effective January 2005

Criterion One: Mission and Integrity The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students.

Criterion Two: Preparing for the Future The organization’s allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.

Criterion Four: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.

Criterion Five: Engagement and Service As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.

Toolkit is brought to you by the Office of Assessment Services: Donna Askins, Editor-in-Chief Joyce Rossi, Assessment Secretary and George, Amy, and Kamalesh, the Assessment Research Assistants.