REFLECTIVE ESSAY 2.1
From Instruction to Student Learning: Shifting the Focus at BYU-Hawaii

The emphasis on educational effectiveness in accreditation has been both a breath of fresh air and a reality check for Brigham Young University-Hawaii. We have long called ourselves a learning institution, a place where students could come from around the world and obtain a liberal arts education within a gospel-centered, multicultural environment. The goals have always been lofty and confidence high when it came to knowing what our priority was and how well we were doing.

Nevertheless, we must admit that only recently have we, as an institution, seen the need to develop the mechanisms that would gather clear and systematic evidence that supported the rhetoric, and clear and systematic data that fueled or encouraged improvement. The assessment efforts to date have compelled us all to take a closer look at ourselves in ways that have been more relevant for all the faculty.

Initial Steps

In March 2001, Dr. James and Karen Nichols visited our campus to guide us in formalizing our assessment efforts. Approximately 45 faculty members attended the Nichols’ workshops. In May 2001, the University Assessment Committee was formed and given responsibilities to help support and strengthen the university departments in assessing student learning. The committee has functioned actively and regularly since it was created. The chair of the committee has always been a faculty member and the vice chair is a member of the university’s administrative staff. The assistant to the president (for institutional research and planning) and the director of university assessment have always been members of the committee and its executive council. The committee has typically had about 12 members, with approximately 6-8 coming from academic departments.

Beginning with the 2001-2002 school year, each academic department was asked to develop a mission-driven assessment plan and identify three to five desired outcomes to assess the progress of their programs. These are by-in-large student learning outcomes. During the school year these outcomes are to be assessed, results gathered, and follow up actions taken to improve the department. Each member of the assessment committee was assigned to mentor approximately four or five departments. In this way, each department on campus had a personal link to the assessment committee. (This mentoring relationship continues to support and advise each department as it develops and revised its assessment plan from year to year.) By the second school year, systematic procedures for the calendaring of assessment reporting had been set up. Each department on campus was responsible to submit the year’s assessment plan to the assessment committee by October 31. Included in that submission would be the results of the previous year assessment activities as well as the plan for the current year which has just begun. During the first year, assessment committee members reported to the committee on the plans for the departments they mentored. However, beginning with the second year, department chairs were asked to visit an assessment committee meeting and directly report on the progress of the department’s assessment activities. (These meetings take place between November and February each year.) This change to have department
chairs personally report on assessment results has led to rank and file academic leaders taking greater ownership for their own assessment responsibilities.

Following reports from the department chairs and feedback from the committee, departments make revisions to their assessment plans. During the remainder of the school year, the departments continue to gather and tabulate results from their means of assessment. Faculty reflect on the findings, take appropriate actions, and develop the next year’s plan by the following October 31. Thus, a continuing, annual cycle has been established for ongoing assessment and improvement of student learning.

**Continuing University Efforts**

We have seen a gradual but steady improvement in the level of assessment activity on campus. Although several departments were initially reluctant to get involved with assessment, by the 2003-2004 school year (the latest fully complete assessment cycle), all 26 academic departments had submitted assessment plans, with 20 of them completing their plans with some findings and actions for the year.

A number of steps have been taken at the university to help in the assessment process. At the time of the Nichols visit, guidebooks were purchased and made available to departments. Also, on the BYU-Hawaii website are listed several types of assessment helps for departments to use in their assessment efforts. The Assessment Checklist provides a concise review of each section of the assessment plan that is being used at the university. The Assessment Guidebook provides background on assessment generally and discusses the assessment model being used at BYU-Hawaii. Guidance is given on the steps of developing mission-driven outcomes and writing those outcomes in an effective way. At the beginning of the 2004-2005 academic year, the assessment committee developed an assessment rubric to evaluate the plans prepared by the department. This rubric is available on the school’s website to help faculty in developing their yearly assessment plans.

**Training and Resources in the Assessment Effort**

Over the past several years, approximately _____ of our faculty have been able to attend at least one assessment conference. We want as many faculty members as possible to attend conferences. The conferences provide training in the how-to-dos of assessment as well as give encouragement for ongoing faculty involvement. An annual assessment budget of approximately $43,000 has been established at the university. One of the purposes of those funds is to finance the attending of conferences. The funds are also used to help departments purchase exams or other materials for assessment purposes.

**Learning Outcomes and Multi-year Assessment Plans**

During the 2004-2005 academic year, academic departments submitted to the Assistant to the President a list of desired student outcomes for their majors to be published in the university’s general catalog. Typically, departments identify about 8-12 program outcomes, a more comprehensive list than the 3-5 outcomes selected each year on departments’ assessment plans.

In March 2005, Dr. Mary Allen spent several days on campus as an assessment consultant. Approximately 50 faculty members attended at least one help session. Approximately 11 departments and schools had department-specific consulting sessions
Allen noticed that several plans were fairly stagnant, prompting her to encourage departments to vary the assessed outcomes from year to year, choosing approximately two outcomes each year. Accordingly, for the coming year, departments, in conjunction with the deans and according to a timeline established by the Assistant to the President, will submit a five year plan, over which time the department will assess each of its student outcomes.

We have been pleased to see evidence that the assessment of student learning, and the corresponding reflection of that assessment by faculty members, has influenced the curriculum and pedagogy of some departments. For example, . . . [I have contacted about seven department chairs that are considered likely candidates to ask about any effect assessment has had on their programs. I hope to get a response and include one or two of them.]

**Future Commitments**

We plan to make continual advancements in our assessment of student learning this year. By the end of October, departments will submit their finalized assessment results for 2004-2005 and their updated assessment plans for 2005-2006. Department chairs will continue to personally report their progress. Assessment committee members will continue to assist each department. In order to strengthen the support to the departments, the assessment rubric will be updated and used in a more formal way during the assessment committee meetings. Also by the Fall 2005 semester, each department will prepare an outcomes matrix, aligning each of the program’s courses with the program’s outcomes. We expect that this step will help departments to scrutinize their programs and evaluate how effectively their curriculum and pedagogy support student learning outcomes. This step should also help departments to organize the long-term assessment of those outcomes across the curriculum.

During the Winter 2006 semester, departments will report their long-term assessment plans. Also in the Winter 2006 semester, a survey will be administered to faculty to gain their feedback on assessment. In February 2006, we plan to start an annual recognition program which awards departments that make exemplary assessment efforts. By the Fall 2006 semester, each course syllabi will document which student outcomes are addressed in that course. In this way, professors will communicate to students from the beginning of each semester the learning outcomes for each course. This step should also help professors to organize each course to ensure that learning outcomes are appropriately assessed.