LEHMAN COLLEGE ASSESSMENT COUNCIL

by Robert Farrell

Given all the talk about Middle States and accreditation requirements lately, it can often seem as though learning outcomes assessment is being imposed on us from outside. It's not. The pace at which we’ve been formalizing the assessment process here at Lehman has, it’s true, been stepped up due to our accreditor; however, the reason why we’re formalizing it is not. We’re doing this because we’re a faculty deeply concerned with excellence in teaching and learning.

The Lehman College Assessment Council was formed in the fall of 2008 to organize assessment documentation gathered prior to our Middle States visit last spring. It was also charged with envisioning the place assessment would have within the institutional structure of the College. Faculty from across the divisions were asked by their chairs, at the request of the Provost, to be a part of this group. Members have continued to be nominated for formal appointment in this way. Appointments are for three-year terms; a chair, a vice-chair, and a secretary are elected within the Council, with the vice-chair succeeding the chair after a two-year term.

The Council has subsequently defined itself as an “advisory body” to faculty, the Deans’ Council, department chairs, the Provost, and other stakeholders responsible for ensuring that student learning objectives are assessed. One of the Council’s main tasks is to identify needs and opportunities in the area of outcomes assessment and make recommendations to address them. Such recommendations have already had positive, tangible effects.

Over the past year-and-a-half, the Council also has put together an ambitious but realistic timeline for institutionalizing outcomes assessment at the College. In support of this, we have held a series of faculty workshops designed to introduce departmental "assessment ambassadors" to the vocabulary and techniques of outcomes assessment.

We’re required to be assessing our programs’ stated objectives on a semester-to-semester basis. There’s no avoiding this. But given this reality, it’s vital that outcomes assessment remain a faculty-driven and faculty-guided process.

More about the Council and its work can be found under “Assessment Council” at www.lehman.cuny.edu/research/assessment.
reviewers that act on behalf of the Federal Government to be reliable authorities regarding academic quality and student achievement for the American public. The Feds use the regionals as gatekeepers of over $90B spent annually on Federal student aid. Rather than prescribe standards as they have done at the elementary and secondary school levels, the Feds afford Middle States and the other regionals the autonomy to establish and enforce quality standards for institutions within the regions.

In recent years, assessment has taken on even more significance as the peer review accreditation system has come under increased scrutiny. Segments of the public view the current system as broken and deem the regionals poor arbiters of educational quality. Detractors have argued that educational standards have been steadily declining, while tuition and related expenses have been exponentially increasing. With most well-paying jobs requiring at least some level of postsecondary education, the public increasingly has been calling for higher education to become more accountable for student success. Many are demanding proof that students are receiving the high-quality education they are promised and are paying for.

The Federal Government also has been calling on higher education to enhance quality by becoming more accountable to its stakeholders. In 2005, former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings appointed a commission charged with recommending strategies for reforming postsecondary education for the twenty-first century. Among the numerous recommendations in the report released the following year was one for postsecondary institutions to measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes. The report called for these outcomes to be made available to students and reported in the aggregate publicly. While many of the recommendations of the commission were not codified into law, they were an integral part of the Higher Education Act's most recent reauthorization negotiations in 2008, and many of them are sure to resurface again in the years ahead.

Clearly, demands for accountability are not going away anytime soon. As Judith Eaton of the Council of Higher Education Association suggests, as a society we all want government, charities, churches, and corporations to be increasingly accountable for our tax dollars and contributions. In this climate, she states, it is “more and more difficult for colleges and universities, which spend hundreds of billions of public and private dollars annually, to argue persuasively that they should not be more accountable for what they produce with those dollars.” At an institution like ours, which receives a large percentage of its resources from public funds, this argument is especially difficult to make.

More important than any of these outside influences, the need to engage in assessment must occur for the benefit of our students. As educators, we want to ensure that our students receive the world-class education that we promise them. We want our graduates to further their studies, to be employable, and to be successful in an ever-changing and increasingly competitive world. Assessing student learning is a critical process that we can employ to help ensure that students are meeting goals and achieving what we want them to achieve. Implemented correctly, this process will better prepare our students, improve our teaching, and help to make Lehman the best institution it can be.

Visit the new assessment web site at: http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/research/assessment/

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WHERE WE ARE; WHERE WE ARE GOING

Lehman College underwent its decennial review by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education last spring. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of the College community, the College’s accreditation status was reaffirmed last June. Middle States, however, has also requested the following:

…a follow-up monitoring report due by April 1, 2011 documenting evidence of the development and implementation of an organized and sustained assessment process to evaluate and improve student learning and institutional effectiveness, including evidence that (1) assessment results are used to improve planning, teaching, and learning (Standards 7 and 14), and (2) establishment of measurable goals at the program and course levels (Standard 14).

Requests for monitoring reports are not rare, but they do require us to make progress in meeting Middle States’ standards. A monitoring action indicates that the Commission has identified one or more standards with which an institution may not be in compliance, if the institution fails to give due attention and continue to make progress. A substantive, detailed report indicating how the institution is meeting the standards is required in response to the action.

For the past year, the College has taken several steps to develop and implement an organized and sustained assessment process. Last academic year, the Lehman College Assessment Council was formed to help facilitate the process of assessing student learning across the institution. In August, Raymond Galinski was hired as the College’s full-time assessment coordinator. He is working with faculty to develop assessment plans and to integrate assessment into the College’s planning process. Additionally, two new associate dean positions in the Divisions of Arts and Humanities and Natural and Social Sciences were established to help coordinate these efforts at the division level.

This past fall, assessment ambassadors in the Division of Arts and Humanities and Natural and Social Sciences were hard at work developing learning goals and objectives for all undergraduate programs. These form the foundation of the assessment process and reflect the knowledge, skills, abilities, and habits of mind that graduating students are expected to possess at the conclusion of their programs of study. Ninety percent of programs have completed this first step.

This spring, the second and third steps of the assessment process are occurring – mapping learning opportunities and assessing objectives. The data collected at the conclusion of this semester will be tabulated and reported back to departments and divisions by the end of May. Next fall, faculty will discuss findings and report what they have learned from the results and explain how the information is being used to improve planning, teaching, and learning. This process of assessing objectives, analyzing data, and using results for improvement is one that will be repeated continuously as we work to build a culture of ongoing evaluation, reflection, and improvement at Lehman.
For the past year, learning outcomes assessment has been a topic of numerous conversations and meetings across campus. But many of you may still be wondering what assessment is all about and why we, as a college community, need to be actively engaged in it. Assessment Central was created to help demystify the process, explain the steps being taken to help improve teaching and learning, and demonstrate to internal and external audiences the effectiveness of current teaching and learning methods.

Assessment Central will also update the College community on assessment activities and events, educate you on important assessment topics, and showcase assessment projects undertaken across the College. We hope that you enjoy this inaugural edition.

ASSESSMENT: A BRIEF HISTORY

Formal assessment of student learning may be new to Lehman College, but it is a process that has been underway in higher education for over two decades. Since the mid-1980s, with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, outcomes assessment language has been included in the nation’s regional accreditors’ standards. Coinciding with the learner-centered movement and gaining momentum with Barr and Tagg’s seminal 1995 article, A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education, student learning outcomes assessment began to take on increased prominence at postsecondary institutions across the nation throughout the 1990s.

In the late 1990s, assessment efforts were furthered as several regional accreditors continued to strengthen their assessment language. In response, colleges in several regions began to create assessment plans, and several new assessment tools were developed to meet these new expectations. In 2002, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education joined in with the publication of Fourteen Characteristics of Excellence, which further emphasized the importance of Institutional Assessment (Standard 7) and Assessment of Student Learning (Standard 14). Now eight years later, Middle States continues to take an increasingly rigorous stance in ensuring that these two standards are being met by institutions in the region.

While often reviled by critics for creating unnecessary mandates for institutions, Middle States and the regionals are actually peer...