

July 7, 2005

Dear President:

As you know, our collaborative efforts to implement Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment, as directed in the SUNY Board of Trustees' June 2004 resolution, continue. During the last week of April we made significant progress in this effort at the assessment conference in Syracuse, attended by almost 200 administrators, faculty and staff, including representatives from all 57 SUNY campuses with general education programs.

Much useful information emerged from the April conference, and my staff members are working diligently over the summer to ensure that, by Fall 2005 when most faculty are back on campus, institutions will have a full understanding of Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment. In this way, they can make informed decisions in implementing this process that are consistent with their own assessment culture and experiences. Central to this objective is clear and frequent communication with campuses, especially as it relates to issues and concerns that have been raised by those responsible for planning and overseeing assessment.

It is in that spirit that I am sending this letter, which is intended to be responsive to major issues that emerged from the April conference, and from the recent meetings of chief academic officers and community college presidents. Attached is a summary of those issues, as well as our intended actions for each, as appropriate. I am also copying this letter to chief academic officers and including a survey to them that will assist us in our planning for Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment at the system level. Please work with your chief academic officer to ensure that this survey is completed and submitted back to us no later than August 8, 2005. I understand that key personnel may not be available to provide meaningful input over the summer months, so ***this survey is necessarily preliminary and not binding.*** Still, having some knowledge of where campuses are in their thinking and decision-making will assist us in our attempts to facilitate the timely availability of all measurement options, so I would greatly appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

I will also take this opportunity to remind you that the campus deadline for submitting revised general education assessment plans for implementing Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment is November 30, 2005. This date is based on the fact that System Administration and campuses, as detailed in the Trustees' resolution, are expected to fully implement Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment no later than Fall 2006. We have defined "full implementation" as that point at which all 57 campuses with undergraduate general education programs have GEAR-approved plans for Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment.

Although we will continue to monitor progress toward meeting this goal going forward, at this time we feel the Fall 2006 target date is attainable, in part because the new GEAR guidelines call for campuses to address only their assessment strategy for Critical Thinking, Basic Communication [Written], and Mathematics. Further, for each learning outcome area campuses will need to address a limited number of issues, including the following:

1. **How they intend to assess the academic environment at their institution:** The most likely choices are the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for the state-operated campuses and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) for the community colleges (see the attachment for more information). Institutions that opt for another instrument will need to demonstrate to the GEAR Group the appropriateness (i.e., in terms of content as well as psychometric properties) of that instrument.
2. **The approach they will use to assess the learning outcomes of interest:** Campuses that choose to use a nationally-normed test will state which particular measure they intend to administer, based on a listing provided by System Administration prior to the Fall 2005 semester (see the attachment for more information). Campuses that opt to use other measures will need to demonstrate to the GEAR Group how those measures meet the requirements of Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment.

Campuses that choose to use rubrics in assessing the learning outcomes actually have two options. First, they may state that they will use the rubrics developed by the discipline-based panels. Second, they may choose to demonstrate to the GEAR Group that their own rubrics correspond to those developed by the panels. For the latter option, campuses may make minor adjustments to the panels' rubrics as necessitated by type of assignment and other appropriate factors. Or, campuses may choose to submit rubrics they have used in the past to assess the learning outcomes areas of interest.

There is no question that implementing an initiative the magnitude of Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment requires significant time, effort, and commitment on the part of all those involved across the State University. I genuinely appreciate the cooperation and general good will that I have encountered when meeting with campus administrators, faculty, and staff as we all work to make the transition to this next phase of the SUNY Assessment Initiative. Please feel free to contact me or Assistant Provost Patricia Francis ([Patricia.Francis@suny.edu](mailto:Patricia.Francis@suny.edu)) or (518) 443-5644) with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Peter D. Salins  
Provost and Vice Chancellor  
for Academic Affairs

Copy: Chancellor (Acting) Ryan  
Vice Chancellor Capaldi  
Campus Chief Academic Officers  
Dr. Francis  
Mr. Wiezalis  
Dr. Reiser

***Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment  
Summary of Major Issues  
July 1, 2005***

**A. Funding**

Since the onset of Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment, it has been the stated intention of System Administration to provide the resources necessary to implement this initiative. In particular, we make the following commitments:

1. To fund the administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), using a schedule and sample sizes as recommended by NSSE and CCSSE. Campuses should understand that, in order to attain optimal pricing for these administrations, it will likely be necessary for campuses to conduct these surveys in the same time frame, and my staff will work to coordinate this effort, maintaining close communication with campuses as they do so. In addition, System Administration will negotiate a pricing structure with NSSE and CCSSE for the entire system and pay these companies centrally, based on information we receive from campuses.
2. To fund the administration of externally-referenced instruments that the campuses choose to use in assessing Critical Thinking, Basic Communication [Written], and Mathematics. Further, we will fund these assessments to at least 20% of the target student population for each of the three learning outcomes areas. For campuses that have been administering these assessments to more than the 20% sample size required by the GEAR Group, we will consider special requests for additional funding on a campus-by-campus basis.

It is important to state that System Administration support for Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment will be limited to the costs of activities and materials that: a) Result directly from the implementation of Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment; and, b) Are clearly above and beyond what campuses do and purchase on a routine basis. For example, faculty members would not receive extra compensation for administering a nationally-normed test or rubric within the context of their course, or for grading an exam or rubric that figures into a student's grade. In contrast, proctoring the administration of an exam outside the context of a course, conducting or attending norming sessions for rubric evaluation, and providing a second evaluation of a student's paper or portfolio would likely qualify for extra compensation. My staff is working on developing guidelines that will include a listing of purchases and activities that would be supported as well as recommended compensation amounts, and these guidelines will be provided to campuses prior to the Fall 2005 semester.

3. The following funding-related points refer specifically to whether a campus chooses to administer nationally-normed instruments or use rubrics in assessing student performance:
  - a. **Nationally-normed instruments**: As is the case with the NSSE and CSSE, it will likely be necessary for campuses to administer the nationally-normed tests in the same time frame. Academic Affairs staff will work to coordinate this effort, maintaining close communication with campuses as they do so. In addition, System Administration will negotiate a pricing structure with testing companies for the entire system and pay these companies centrally, based on information we receive from campuses.

- b. **Rubrics:** Because the administration of rubric-scored assessments necessarily takes place at the campus level and because these assessments will vary widely across institutions, individual campuses will have responsibility for monitoring expenses and submitting them to System Administration for reimbursement. As this process takes place over time and we come to have a sense of what this process costs for each campus, it may become possible to provide this funding before the actual assessments take place.

## **B. Mapping Assessments to All SUNY Learning Outcomes**

As my staff members have worked to identify externally-referenced measures that might be appropriate for use in Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment, the following issues have emerged:

1. Suitability of existing nationally-normed tests. Through our ongoing discussions with testing companies, and as was reported at the April conference, we realize that at present nationally-normed instruments do not exist that meet all of the following central needs of Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment: 1) Inclusion of test items that map to all of the learning outcomes for the three areas of interest; 2) Capacity for yielding sub-scores for these learning outcomes; and, 3) Ability to administer the instruments within the context of a class session. We continue to work with the testing companies, however, and feel they are interested in developing instruments that will meet these needs. Prior to the Fall 2005 semester we will provide campuses with detailed information as to those instruments that would be appropriate for use in Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment.
2. Difficulty in assessing all components of the learning outcomes. It became clear at the April conference that meeting externally-referenced standards – whether through the nationally-normed or rubrics approach – for all the learning outcomes of interest is likely to be quite difficult for campuses. A good example is the outcome included under Basic Communication [Written] that students demonstrate the ability to “research” a topic.

In recognition of this difficulty, I have asked my staff to consult with our discipline-based panels as well as representatives from the testing companies and make recommendations as to those learning outcomes or components of learning outcomes that might reasonably be omitted from Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment of general education. Under this scenario, learning outcomes omitted from Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment would still be expected to be included in an institution’s campus-based general education plan, but the institution would not need to meet the requirement of externally-referenced standards. Prior to the Fall 2005 semester, we will issue a clear statement of expectations regarding this matter.

3. Campus variations in interpreting student learning outcomes. Another issue that arose at the April conference related to the meaning of “revising and improving” text, as stipulated in the second learning outcome under Basic Communication [Written]. Specifically, while some attendees expressed the view that this learning outcome necessarily requires students to revise and improve their own writing (i.e., through multiple drafts), others felt that students can in fact demonstrate these competencies in other ways (e.g., by correcting an ungrammatical sentence or paragraph given as a prompt). Because both of these interpretations seem reasonable, and because the learning outcomes themselves are not specific in this respect, I am willing to let individual campuses make their own decisions regarding this issue, consistent with their own existing approach to teaching and assessing writing.