



**REPORT OF THE  
PROVOST'S ADVISORY TASK FORCE ON THE  
ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

*Executive Summary*

In Fall 1999, the Provost established an Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes as a committee broadly representative of the SUNY community. Membership included faculty, campus academic leadership and professional staff, students, and System Administration staff. The Task Force was charged with the responsibility to:

- Examine and discuss the issues involved in implementing undergraduate student learning outcomes assessment today—specifically, in the context of a large and diverse university system such as the State University of New York,

and to make recommendations regarding:

- A process for assessing student learning outcomes and intellectual growth in General Education and the Major that will provide the faculty and academic leadership with an important and effective way of improving the quality of undergraduate education, and the University with a coherent and meaningful longitudinal data base with which to be accountable to its stakeholders.

The Task Force began its work on the SUNY Assessment Initiative in November with a general discussion about the many practical and philosophical issues involved in outcomes assessment, particularly as it affects the State University. Subsequently, it formed a number of working groups to study the issues in greater detail. At every step, the Task Force has endeavored to keep the University community informed, by publishing summaries of its meetings, meeting with groups such as the University Faculty Senate, the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, academic vice presidents, vice presidents for student affairs, and the Provost's Advisory Council on General Education, and sharing its Interim Report with campus presidents and campus communities. It has been the Task Force's goal to maintain a very transparent and collegial process so as to be able to develop recommendations that will find broad support across the State University.

**ASSESSMENT'S DUAL FUNCTIONS: IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

The Task Force believes that assessment serves two complementary functions in higher education today: "Assessment as improvement" and "Assessment as accountability," and that both of these functions have an appropriate place in the SUNY Assessment Initiative and can strengthen the University's institutions and the system as a whole.

*Assessment as Improvement*

The SUNY Assessment Initiative places foremost emphasis on assessment as a means of improving student learning. Outcomes assessment is based upon the belief that improvement in practices is a healthy aspect of institutional life. A number of colleges and universities across the nation have acted systematically on this belief and, in the process, enhanced their programs, student learning outcomes, and their academic reputation. Assessment of student outcomes is also in the best interests of faculty, who have a great stake in knowing whether or not their teaching efforts are effective in promoting student learning. There is a growing literature on the advantages of the assessment process in facilitating communication among faculty and providing them an opportunity to collaborate regarding the intended outcomes of their curricular programs.

### ***Assessment as Accountability***

As a publicly supported institution, SUNY has a responsibility to demonstrate to its stakeholders that it is fulfilling its mission. These stakeholders include: The Board of Trustees, College Council members and the Boards of Trustees of Community Colleges, executive and legislative officials, students and their parents, the public, employers and the communities served by campuses, and accrediting and regulatory bodies.

The Task Force's recognition of these two functions of assessment is directly reflected in the following recommendations:

- The SUNY Assessment Initiative should place foremost emphasis on assessment as a means of improving academic programs, pedagogy, and student learning.
- The SUNY Assessment Initiative should consist of both campus-based and University-wide strategies, with campus-based assessment focused primarily on program improvement and University-wide assessment used primarily to serve accountability and advocacy functions.

### **RESPECTING CAMPUS DISTINCTIVENESS AND AUTONOMY**

The State University, largest in the nation, is also one of the most diverse, consisting of 64 campuses that have unique missions and which have operated effectively over the years according to their own governance and curriculum processes. Just as campuses have been allowed to implement the SUNY General Education requirement in ways that are consistent with their own structures and procedures, so must they be given flexibility to assess their programs "in accord with their own characteristics." The Task Force therefore recommends:

- The SUNY Assessment Initiative must respect the diversity that exists among SUNY institutions, especially their unique missions.
- All activities carried out as a part of the SUNY Assessment Initiative should incorporate and respect existing governance and curriculum structures and processes.

### **RESOURCES AND SUPPORT FOR ASSESSMENT**

Individual campuses and programs cannot be expected to implement comprehensive and effective campus-based assessment of General Education and the Major without new funding set aside for that purpose. A paramount responsibility for System Administration is to work assiduously with the campuses and the Trustees to guarantee that assessment efforts receive adequate resources, staff assistance, and funding on a sustained basis. Further, the SUNY Assessment Initiative provides System Administration with an invaluable opportunity to use assessment information to inform the teaching and learning process, highlighting the various campus-based assessment approaches so that communication across campuses is enhanced and faculty from different institutions can learn from each other. The Task Force therefore recommends:

- SUNY System Administration should make a commitment to providing adequate resources on a sustained basis so that campuses are able to develop and implement effective modes of assessment of student learning outcomes.
- Individual campuses should support assessment efforts by making assessment-related funding needs a priority in their budgets.
- SUNY System Administration should assume responsibility for coordinating and facilitating assessment efforts across the 64 campuses and should provide multiple forums for the purpose of highlighting and publicizing best assessment practices.
- SUNY System Administration should commit itself to the provision of databases that are reliable, coordinated, and available to appropriate persons.

## **CAMPUS-BASED ASSESSMENT OF GENERAL EDUCATION**

Each campus is responsible for determining the particular structure and content of its campus-based General Education assessment plan, following existing governance and curriculum processes. Similarly, individual campuses should have autonomy in determining how to disseminate the results of their campus-based General Education assessment program to their own communities. Some external review of assessment plans is desirable, preferably by faculty, administrators, and System Administration representatives who have a good working knowledge of assessment. It is also desirable that there be some uniformity among campuses in the format of the assessment plans as well as in the reporting of assessment results. Toward these ends, the Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- Campus-based assessment plans of General Education should be developed and implemented primarily by faculty members who teach in the program, with the assistance of professional staff and students when appropriate, and submitted to and approved by the campus's Faculty Senate or Council.
- Campus General Education assessment plans should be approved and reviewed regularly by a group consisting of University faculty, campus chief academic officers, and representatives from System Administration. This General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) group should be formed jointly by University Faculty Senate and Community College Faculty Council leadership and System Administration, and should include individuals who are knowledgeable about assessment.
- Campuses should use a standardized format, developed jointly by the campuses and System Administration, in reporting the results of their General Education assessment program to System Administration. Reported results should indicate the percentage of students exceeding, meeting, approaching, and not meeting the delineated learning outcomes.

## **UNIVERSITY-WIDE ASSESSMENT OF GENERAL EDUCATION**

SUNY University-wide assessment is governed by the assumption that academic assessment is primarily a campus-based responsibility of the faculty as they conduct the educational programs of their institutions and participate significantly in the initiation, development and implementation of those educational programs. Although campus-based assessment should be the focus of the SUNY Assessment Initiative, the Task Force believes that there is an appropriate place for University-wide assessment as well. Information derived from University-wide assessment will be used primarily by System Administration for accountability purposes—enabling it to report on the status of General Education outcomes in SUNY as a whole—and to advocate on behalf of the University. The Task Force specifically recommends:

- University-wide assessment should periodically assess, using common measures, a representative sample of students from across SUNY in order to gauge students' attainment in the learning outcomes of the *Implementation Guidelines* in Mathematics, Basic Communication, Critical Thinking (Reasoning), Information Management, and the understanding of the methods scientists and social scientists use to explore phenomena.
- A University-wide Assessment Implementation Working Group, comprised of faculty and students from across SUNY, with representatives from System Administration, should be formed to develop the actual assessment instrument(s) to be used, as well as the procedures to be followed.
- University-wide assessment should utilize a variety of evaluation approaches, all of which are demonstrated to be valid and reliable.
- Campuses should have sufficient time to develop and implement their own assessment programs before implementation of University-wide assessment proceeds.

## **ASSESSING THE MAJOR**

Each campus is responsible for overseeing the process through which the assessment of academic major programs takes place, following existing curriculum and governance procedures. It is desirable that individual campuses establish a uniform format for programs to follow in developing their assessment plans, that program assessment take place on a regular basis, and that there be external review of programs when practicable. The Task Force does not recommend University-wide assessment of academic majors. Instead, the role of System Administration should focus on revising extant program review policies and on monitoring the frequency with which program review takes place across the University. Toward these ends, the Task Force makes the following recommendations:

- Campuses and programs should have maximum autonomy in the development of assessment plans for academic majors, and should include the input of faculty, professional staff, and students.
- Assessment of academic programs should take place every five to seven years, should incorporate external review whenever feasible, and should include delineation of the programmatic goals and objectives for the major with an emphasis on the programmatic activities that are intended to accomplish these goals and objectives and the learning outcomes students should demonstrate as they progress through the program to completion, as well as a strategy for measuring change in students' knowledge and skills over time.
- Academic programs should use a standardized format and consistent procedures developed by their campus in developing and implementing their assessment plans, although latitude should be granted for programs also undergoing accreditation or certification.
- Each year institutions should submit a report to System Administration providing a summary of the academic programs that underwent review during that year and the major findings, as well as a listing of programs scheduled for review during the next academic year.
- Recommendations for assessing student learning outcomes in the Major should be carried out within the broader framework of the University Faculty Senate's *Guide for the Evaluation of Undergraduate Academic Programs*.
- System Administration should renew its efforts to track campus-based assessment and program review efforts.

### **UTILIZATION AND REPORTING OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS**

Assessment is not evaluation, nor is it competition. Assessment is a process, first and foremost, for understanding and improving student learning. Further, a true “culture of assessment” requires that assessment results—for campus-based assessment of General Education and the Major, and for University-wide assessment—be shared only with appropriate stakeholders. The Task Force therefore makes the following recommendations with respect to the utilization and reporting of assessment data gathered as part of the SUNY Assessment Initiative:

- System Administration should only report data gathered through University-wide assessment for accountability purposes after adequate reliability and validity estimates of the measures being used are demonstrated.
- Stringent guidelines should be developed and adhered to in order to ensure that confidentiality of assessment data is maintained.
- Assessment results should never be used to punish, publicly compare, or embarrass students, faculty, courses, programs, departments, or institutions either individually or collectively, or to make public comparisons among groups of students based on gender, race, ethnicity, or other demographic factors.
- System Administration should publicly disseminate assessment data only through aggregate reporting for SUNY as a whole, or by sector.
- While individual programs are free to use their own assessment results in ways they see fit, individual campuses should publicly disseminate assessment data only through aggregate reporting for the institution as a whole, or by school or college.

### **INCENTIVES FOR ENGAGING IN ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY**

Just as System Administration and individual campuses must provide adequate support for the actual implementation of effective assessment, they must also convey to faculty and staff across the State University that participation in assessment is worthy of recognition and reward. In this way, assessment is acknowledged as a valuable—and valued—activity. The Task Force therefore recommends:

- System Administration should support State-operated/funded institutions with resources for campus-based assessment through Performance Funding, based upon a determination of the extent to which campuses have implemented their assessment plans for General Education and the Major. An alternative incentive process will need to be established for community colleges.
- Individual campuses should reward academic programs for assessment activities through their budgeting process to the greatest extent possible and recognize the assessment-related efforts of faculty and professional staff through appropriate personnel processes and incentives.