Summary of Objectives for the Special Emphasis Self-Study

The University of Iowa chose to use the reaccreditation process as an opportunity to advance a campus-wide conversation about an area where we, like many other public research universities, have felt a need to refocus and recommit ourselves: our core mission, undergraduate education. Our goal was to make a critical, evidence-based self-examination, and thereby arrive at a comprehensive, shared understanding of what we do well and where we need to focus our attention to accelerate progress toward the first of our five top-level strategic planning goals: “To create a University experience that enriches the lives of undergraduates and helps them to become well-informed individuals, lifelong learners, engaged citizens, and productive employees and employers.”

In short, this special emphasis self-study has a dual purpose: 1) to demonstrate (in conjunction with the institutional self-study) that we meet the high standards of the HLC criteria for accreditation, and 2) to set a direction for the University’s next steps as we seek to enhance the UI undergraduate experience.

Summary of Findings

Our inventory and evaluation of programs, policies, and practices related to undergraduate education at The University of Iowa—drawing on feedback from students, faculty, staff, University administrators, and members of the community—highlighted many signs of success, as well as challenges we must overcome as we move forward.

We measure student success in many ways, most fundamentally by students’ ability to persist at the University and to graduate in a reasonable period of time. We also
hope students make full use of the extraordinary resources we have to offer as a comprehensive, nationally ranked research university. Because we are constrained by state-mandated admission standards, the University has limited control over how prepared students are when they enter the University. We have met with some success over the last ten years in recruiting students who are better prepared to succeed, and have seen record numbers of honors students in the first-year class in each of the last two years. Our best opportunity to influence persistence and graduation rates significantly, however, will continue to derive from the development of student success initiatives that guide students of all levels of preparation to make wise academic and co-curricular choices. We are working to make this focus on “access to success” part of the University culture. Several innovative student success programs have had a positive effect on retention, a broadly representative Student Success Team has been formed and a director of student success initiatives appointed, and various promising new initiatives are in development.

We also know that our ability to provide an excellent undergraduate education depends on creating a diverse learning environment, and we have made important gains over the last two years in increasing the diversity of our student body, in spite of the relative lack of diversity in our state. We must make sure that our recent progress continues, and becomes a meaningful trend. To that end, we must do more to ensure that we are creating a welcoming environment for all students, integrating them into the University’s academic culture, and nurturing a sense of community.

The University’s General Education Program is strong and seems to be functioning well. It could benefit, however, from a more transparent structure, and a review of its intended outcomes. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has formed a committee to begin such a review. To the extent possible, the University should address obstacles to teaching communication skills, especially writing, in large general education courses.

We offer an impressive range of major programs and other opportunities for specialized study, and an equally impressive array of opportunities for educationally purposeful co-curricular activity. We might not be doing all we can, however, to guide students to these programs or to help students make good choices among them. Evidence from our study suggests that we may be able to improve advising for students as they work toward selecting a major program, and that we might find more effective ways to let students know about engagement opportunities and to help them find those that complement their academic development. We can do more to encourage meaningful student engagement, which research has shown contributes significantly to student success (Kuh et al, 2005a).

Many review processes are in place to ensure that individuals and programs accomplish stated goals, and the University has long required assessment of student learning outcomes as an element of academic program reviews. Nonetheless, efforts to assess learning outcomes of academic programs have been uneven, and formal assessment has rarely been applied to co-curricular programs. The University has taken action to begin to strengthen outcomes assessment in the undergraduate majors and in distance learning courses, and should encourage systematic assessment in other areas that affect student success as well.

Finally, the University provides excellent learning environments, but as we look to the future we must ensure new and modified physical and virtual spaces that maximizes flexibility for various pedagogical styles. We might also find ways to enhance the
effectiveness of spaces that are central to undergraduate academic and extracurricular life, including the Main Library and the Iowa Memorial Union.

Initiatives for Progress

Overview

We have identified a series of initiatives we believe will help us make significant progress toward our goals and meet the needs of those we serve, especially undergraduate students, more effectively.

We have grouped the initiatives into four interrelated, overarching areas of focus that call for the University to:

- Identify and implement improvements to the General Education Program
- Continue to focus on “access to success”
- Foster student academic and co-curricular engagement
- Enhance learning environments to encourage intellectual and physical vitality

In addition, we have identified four cross-cutting themes—issues that will affect our success in each of the four areas above. The themes are:

- The need to institutionalize a culture of assessment across the University, in all areas of our mission
- The need for better communication and collaboration among units, programs, and individuals
- The need to involve faculty more directly in each of the focus areas
- The value of cultivating a sense of “positive restlessness”

Initiatives Grouped by Area of Focus

Focus Area 1: The General Education Program

In choosing to incorporate a review of the University’s General Education Program (GEP) into our self-study, we sought to collect information and provide a report that would serve as a basis, if necessary, for a more focused reexamination and, if necessary, redesign of the GEP.

Our study found that we have a strong, well-administered, flexible GEP that is working well. Some students and faculty find its organization confusing, however, and feel it lacks coherence. Our study also suggests that we may be achieving some of the desired learning outcomes of the GEP better than others.

Initiative 1a: Reorder General Education Program structure.

Faculty find the names of the GEP subject areas unclear and inconsistent and the organization confusing, and the subcommittee on Common Academic Experiences reported that students agree. “Humanities” and “social sciences,” for example, are names of traditional disciplines, and students do not always understand what they encompass. “Interpretation of literature” and “rhetoric” are names of specific GEP courses. “Quantitative or formal reasoning” is a skill. The name of the “distributed"
category does not help students understand what it offers.

The inclusion of “cultural diversity” and “foreign civilization and culture” sub-areas in the GEP distributed area is one of many strategies the University has implemented to advance its goals related to diversity and globalization of the curriculum. Because the distributed area differs in structure and name from the other subject areas, however, many find it confusing. Its placement near the end in all GEP charts and schemas might reinforce the sense that this area and its sub-areas are “add-ons,” not well integrated into the program as a whole.

In short, the organization and names of the various components of the program fail to create a sense of coherence.

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS), in consultation with the Office of the Provost, in August 2007 appointed the General Education Advisory Committee to study the GEP organizational structure and area names, and suggest revisions. Building on the recommendations of the Common Academic Experiences subcommittee, the committee’s goal is to arrive at a more coherent, integrated program that focuses on the unique educational and cultural experiences offered by The University of Iowa. Most of the committee’s members are CLAS faculty who are involved with the GEP, but the committee also includes representation from the College of Education, the Tippie College of Business, and the Academic Advising Center, as well as a student member. At the time of this writing, preliminary results from the committee show good progress toward developing a way of representing the GEP that will be clear to students and faculty members.

**Initiative 1b: Revise the General Education Program criteria and outcomes.**

The UI General Education Program is ambitious, with many, detailed criteria and intended outcomes that sometimes lead to confusion about the program’s goals, or to a sense that not all of the goals are achievable. Moreover, as the program has evolved, some confusion has arisen about both intended and unintended outcomes.

The General Education Advisory Committee should suggest revisions to the criteria for and intended outcomes of the program, with the goal of simplifying them and also highlighting the distinctiveness and coherence of the reorganized program.

**Initiative 1c: Assess desired learning outcomes.**

CLAS should determine a schedule for isolating selected GEP desired learning outcomes, and assessing them in a manner it finds practical and useful. The preliminary work of the General Education Advisory Committee suggests that the GEP outcomes can be grouped into a small number of areas. Outcomes in each of those areas can then be assessed, perhaps on a rotating basis.

If the General Education Advisory Committee determines that the two learning outcomes identified as under-represented—social responsibility and life of the mind—should be brought into balance with the others, one assessment might focus on how to strengthen these two areas.

We suggest that a top priority for assessment is communication skills, since faculty feel that practice and achievement in writing skills are insufficient in the GEP. Faculty find writing skills especially difficult to teach in large courses, and although some have found creative solutions, many see teaching GEP courses as a burden because of it.
As part of examining this issue, the College should address performance standards in writing and other communications skills.

As we consider the assessment of general education outcomes, we must keep in mind the relationship between general education and the University’s major programs. The assessment plan for general education must be implemented as part of an overall strategic plan for assessment of undergraduate student learning.

In spring and fall 2008 UI will administer to a sample of first-year and senior students the writing and critical reasoning test modules of ACT’s Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) program. The University hopes this will provide useful information about the effectiveness of our current general education strategies.

Focus Area 2: “Access to Success”

Our mission as a public university demands a continued focus on “access to success.” Our admissions policies define the students we seek to serve, and within those policies, we have recently demonstrated some success in attracting increasingly well prepared classes to enroll in the University. Once we have admitted students, we must focus on finding ways to help all of our students cultivate the skills and habits they need to succeed in college and beyond. We will build on the positive developments of the past ten years, and put to effective use our more sophisticated understanding of the factors that contribute to student success.

Initiative 2a: Find more and better ways to instill an understanding of what it means to be a University of Iowa student.

The RISE study strongly reinforces our sense that the University needs to do a better job of creating appropriate expectations among new undergraduates and reinforcing those expectations with continuing students. We must find new ways to teach what it means—or what we want it to mean—to be an Iowa student. What kinds of learning do we want them to seek? What kinds of relationships do we want them to build? What kinds of community do we want them to create?

The Student Success Team (SST) will continue its work on the “Message Project,” which aims to identify the core messages we should impart to all students. In summer 2007, the SST surveyed the University community to ask “What messages should the University communicate to prospective and current students about what it means to be an undergraduate at The University of Iowa?” About 2,400 individuals responded, and from their feedback the SST created a draft of what is called, for the time being, “the Message.” The collaborative and consultative process of revision will continue, as will discussions about how to incorporate the final message into University print and web materials most effectively. In addition, we will continue discussions about strategies for ensuring that the message is a “lived” message, supported by the actions of the faculty, staff, and administration of the University.

Pursuing this initiative will help the University advance several of the other initiatives and themes presented here, especially those under Focus Area 3, “student academic and co-curricular engagement.”

Initiative 2b: Study issues in academic advising

Our self-study suggests that we could improve academic advising in some areas.
One acknowledged area of difficulty is helping students through the difficult process of selecting a major. We are investigating creating an online course to help guide students in making educational and vocational choices. This resource would engage students in a self-reflective process before they meet with their advisors—making the time spent with advisors more focused and more effective.

Another challenge is the uneven quality of advising within academic departments. We must find ways to encourage departments to strengthen their advising systems and encourage faculty advisors to improve their mentoring skills. This might be done, in part, by increasing awareness of successful programs and by providing public recognition for effective advisors.

This is an area in which the findings of our self-study seem less conclusive than in others. We might need to conduct a more specific study of advising to develop a thorough understanding of the issues we face.

**Initiative 2c: Create a comprehensive early intervention system for students in difficulty.**

Research has demonstrated the importance of “redundant early warning systems that identify and respond to students whose academic performance or other behaviors put them at risk of failure or dropping out” (Kuh et al., 2005a, p. 260). The University will develop a comprehensive, coordinated system to identify and respond to students in difficulty.

In fall 2007 a task force has been charged with addressing this issue. A Phase One report, due early in 2008, will include descriptions of proven practices in early intervention systems. The report will also assess the resources available and the particular needs that must be met and challenges to be overcome at UI. A Phase Two report, due in spring 2008, will constitute a proposal for a comprehensive early intervention system at UI, including elements of the systems, models for governance and staffing, resource needs, and assessment methods.

**Initiative 2d: Build on the success of learning communities.**

The RISE study and other evidence demonstrate a positive correlation between involvement in a learning community in the first year at The University of Iowa and persistence into the second year. In spring 2007, the senior associate provost for undergraduate education created the Task Force on Learning Communities, charged with identifying successful practices in undergraduate learning communities, assessing current UI contexts for expanding learning communities, and initiating a proposal for a “scalable” program of learning communities at UI. That task force is completing its report in December 2007, and the University administration will carefully consider its recommendations.

Demand for the Honors House in Daum has been particularly high, and the Honors Program is considering plans to create clusters of honors students in other residence halls, as well as to create themed “sub-communities” in Daum.

**Initiative 2e: Consider an extended orientation program**

In recognition of the limitations of a two-day summer orientation program, The University of Iowa is exploring options for extended orientation experiences. Under the umbrella of the Student Success Team, interested parties, including Orientation Services, University Housing, and UI Student Government, will investigate a variety of
possibilities—including a several-day program, to be held immediately before classes begin—that could help new students feel more connected to the University and more prepared to engage actively in the academic and co-curricular life of the campus than is possible after a one- or two-day summer program. Students would become acclimated to campus, and learn how to make the most of the resources available to them, before the stress of classes begins. The program would foster cooperation among faculty, student support staff, and other campus resources by giving them shared responsibility for a program focused on student success. Also under consideration are additional first and second semester transition programs.

**Initiative 2f: Augment efforts to improve graduation rates of racial/ethnic minority students**

Although overall four- and six-year graduation rates have improved over the past ten years, the University continues to struggle to increase the graduation rates of racial/ethnic minority students, particularly African American and Latino students.

The Board of Regents, State of Iowa, has formed a Regent Interinstitutional Task Force on Retention, Graduation, and Diversity, which will issue its report in March 2008. We expect that report to indicate that many of the key challenges we face lie in the general area of “climate.” Some part of the climate issue might be attributed to the relatively low proportion of our campus community, at all levels, that are members of groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. To the extent that that is the case, our recent success in increasing the enrollment of students of color is a positive development. We hope the fact that these students are as well prepared as they are will lead to improved persistence. Increases in faculty of color also can be an important factor in improving student persistence.

We are convinced, though, that we can do more. At the time of this writing, we are in the process of arranging for an external team of experts to study the University’s efforts and challenges and recommend changes to policies, programs, and practices to improve success among students of color.

**Focus Area 3: Student Academic and Co-Curricular Engagement**

A host of current research, including the University’s own RISE study and other analyses, has demonstrated that both academic engagement and participation in educationally purposeful co-curricular activities have positive effects on outcomes related to student success.

The RISE report suggests that UI students are spending surprisingly little time on academic work. Students in the RISE focus groups described their experience as lacking in academic challenge and characterized by low expectations. Survey respondents reported completing small numbers of assigned readings, essay exams, and papers, and spending a low number of hours in class preparation.

One special concern related to this issue is the problem of alcohol use by UI students (see Focus Area 4). We are struck by the suggestion made by seniors interviewed for the RISE report who asserted that Iowa’s ‘reputation as a party school’ was associated with its perceived lack of academic challenge; that is, if UI provided more academic challenges, students would not be able to spend so much time partying as they do.
This compelling observation—along with the report’s finding that 10 to 12 hours of class preparation, or less than half of what faculty and advisors say they expect, is enough for students to earn a B average—lends a particular urgency to the goals of setting clear expectations and engaging students in the academic life of the University.

At the same time, in spite of the wide variety of options available, it appears that a smaller percentage of the student body than we wish actually engages in educationally purposeful co-curricular activities. Evidence from this self-study and from the RISE study suggests that students feel it is up to them to find engagement opportunities and to create positive experiences for themselves. They describe as “challenging,” however, the process of finding the opportunities and resources necessary to craft a successful and engaging college experience (RISE report, p. 46), particularly in the first year of college. The report also makes clear that UI has a very student-driven culture, in which students learn about opportunities—and how, or whether, to take advantage of those opportunities—primarily from their peers, not from faculty and staff.

We must find better ways to help students make good choices when faced with the extraordinary array of options available to them, and we need to set clear and appropriately high expectations.

Several initiatives mentioned under other areas of focus and themes will also help foster student engagement, including the “Message Project” (Focus Area 2), implementing outcomes assessment for academic and co-curricular programs (Theme 2), and building on the success of learning communities (Focus Area 2).

**Initiative 3a: Participate in national surveys.**

The University of Iowa plans to participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) in spring 2008. Many institutions have found these surveys very useful. We expect them to provide considerable data to help the University make informed decisions about future directions.

**Initiative 3b: Assess the outcomes of current academic initiatives such as Friday classes and the pilot “D, F, W study.”**

As mentioned in the “Environments and Resources for Learning” section of this self-study, in fall 2008 the University will begin a project to shift some Monday classes to Fridays. The use (or lack of use) of Friday classes plays a significant role in shaping University culture. It sends a message about priorities and expectations; and, as noted, research has suggested that students who take Friday classes are less likely to engage in binge drinking on Thursdays. The pilot project will emphasize classes that enroll first-year students, and will include required attendance.

The vice provost is conducting a pilot project to study classes with high incidence of D, F, and W grades. The goal of the project is to investigate ways to improve the success of students in those courses without decreasing the courses’ academic rigor.

The outcomes of these pilot projects will be thoroughly assessed. If they meet their objectives, the University should extend their reach.
**Initiative 3c: Identify, inventory, and communicate opportunities for student co-curricular engagement.**

Although a comprehensive list of student organizations is available from the Office of Student Life, students seem to find the list itself overwhelming, and lacking in information that would help them make the choice to investigate any particular organization. Students report that they delete most of the tremendous volume of e-mail they receive from campus units, including student organizations, so e-mail is an ineffective form of advertising.

Word of mouth seems to be the most effective method of communicating with students about events and organizations. Students learn about opportunities from their friends, and appreciate hearing about them from faculty and teaching assistants in class or from resident advisors in their residence halls. Students also make extensive use of web sites to seek information of particular interest to them.

The Office of Student Life and a committee of Student Success Team (SST) members are working to create an expanded inventory of involvement opportunities, which will become a comprehensive, one-stop resource for students. The committee also will consider how to implement this resource most effectively.

In summer 2008 the SST will implement a new program called “Pick One,” which encourages new students, during orientation, to pick one co-curricular activity in which to get involved. The team will follow up with an assessment of this initiative.

**Initiative 3d: Create more peer educator opportunities and communicate them to students.**

Although there are several successful peer education and mentoring programs on campus (as described in the “Learning Alongside the Curriculum” section of this self-study), there is no central resource for students to learn about available opportunities. We will consider ways to create more of these opportunities (which benefit the mentor as much as, if not more than, the mentee), and ensure that we advertise them so that more students can realize their benefits.

The University can do much more to connect new students with positive role models among their peers, and help shape the messages students receive from other students. Involved students will encourage other students to get involved, creating a culture where involvement is the norm and building community in the process.

We should expand, for example, on programs such as the one being developed by the College of Engineering, which has upperclass students mentor newer students. Orientation Services should continue to use peer advisors in their programming, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences should encourage expanded use of peer mentors in first-year seminars. The University will consider how to formalize an institutional commitment to peer mentoring programs to support underrepresented students.

**Initiative 3e: Encourage collaboration among departments, units, and colleges to promote educationally purposeful engagement opportunities.**

Although many units are involved in providing engagement opportunities for students, they seem to share their experiences infrequently. As described under Theme 2, programs sometimes work in “silos,” without sharing resources, ideas, and effective practices. Students, faculty, and staff in our study mentioned that this contributes to the difficulty in finding out about opportunities and effective programming across campus.
The University will investigate ways to encourage collaboration among departments, units, and colleges, and include them in efforts to create a centralized method for communicating engagement opportunities to students.

Focus Area 4: Learning Environments that Encourage Intellectual and Physical Vitality

The “learning environment” at UI includes the physical setting, virtual teaching and learning tools, and the culture and climate that shape our expectations of ourselves and others.

The University’s physical and virtual teaching and learning environments seem to be functioning well, and have been enhanced significantly by recent developments such as the renovation of the Iowa Memorial Union and the consolidation of course management systems into ICON. Our study identified no issues in urgent need of correction, but did point to some issues that will have increasing importance in our planning processes, including the need for greater flexibility in classroom environments and for more effective collaborative learning spaces.

The larger learning environment—our culture and climate—includes many remarkable aspects that encourage physical and intellectual vitality, such as the balance between cutting-edge research in the sciences on one hand and remarkable strength in the arts and humanities on the other. But the “drinking culture” at UI clearly interferes with student success, and the high rate of binge drinking endangers students’ health and well-being. As stated in the focus areas above, the University must set and communicate clear expectations and help students make good choices about their health and priorities.

In addition, the most effective learning environment for all members of the UI community will include and support people diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, and many other characteristics. In this self-study, to avoid duplicating efforts already undertaken, we have pointed to the recommendations of the Diversity Action Committee and the results of the diversity climate surveys, as well as the report of the ADA compliance review task force, among others. What bears emphasis here are the climate survey results that demonstrate undergraduate students from racial/ethnic minority groups report experiencing significantly less access, equity, and inclusion—and significantly less satisfaction with their UI experience—than their majority peers. Minority students also question the commitment of the University and its leaders to diversity, despite assertions to the contrary in The Iowa Promise. In the face of these and other challenges, however, the University will continue to strive to create welcoming, supportive, and effective learning environments for everyone. To do otherwise is unacceptable.

Initiative 4a: Continue to address alcohol issues.

In fall 2007 the interim executive vice president and provost convened an alcohol task force to recommend ways that UI can combat the problem of binge drinking. That task force should work closely with Student Health Services, the Office of Student Services Campus and Community Relations, and others with expertise in the issue and how it affects UI students.

Initiative 4b: Implement the Healthy Living Network.

As mentioned in the Environments and Resources for Learning section of this self-
study, the Division of Student Services is developing a “Healthy Living Network” to encourage collaborative efforts to promote student health. The division has identified desired outcomes and measures that will be used to evaluate the program’s success.

The University will seek broad support for this promising effort and follow up with a thorough examination of assessment data.

**Initiative 4c: Plan for flexible physical and virtual learning environments.**

As we develop physical spaces in the future, we must pay increased attention to issues of flexibility, including room size, configuration, equipment, and lighting. The University’s classrooms need to support various pedagogical styles.

Future large classrooms should be built with “breadth over depth” in mind, a design that permits greater eye contact and reduces the potential for disruption.

In addition, demand for dual screens and projectors and for blackboards and whiteboards that are not hidden when a projection screen is lowered will increase. Availability of electrical outlets will become more important as more students use laptops in class. And the wireless network should be available in all general assignment classrooms, in addition to the Libraries, meeting rooms, and other student-focused spaces.

With regard to virtual learning environments, we need to be prepared to support new collaborative technologies—and to ensure that as we implement new technologies, we continue to monitor them for quality that is consistent with traditional, physical environments.

**Initiative 4d: Explore ways to make common spaces more effective in meeting student needs.**

The University will conduct a survey to determine student reactions to the Phase I renovation of the Iowa Memorial Union (IMU), and use the results of that survey as one source of data to inform plans to encourage the use of the IMU as a study venue.

The Iowa Memorial Union should consider extending the hours of The Hawkeye (the new entertainment space) to compete with the bar scene.

Our study identified a growing need for collaborative work spaces in the Libraries, to support interdisciplinary endeavors and interaction among students and between students and faculty. These spaces should also offer access to online materials.

**Themes**

To this list of focus areas and initiatives for progress we add four themes that emerged during the self-study. Addressing issues related to these themes will have a positive impact on each of the focus areas and initiatives above. The themes are:

- The need to create a culture of assessment across the University, in all areas of our mission
- The need for better communication and collaboration among units and programs
- The need to involve faculty more directly in each of the focus areas
- The value of cultivating a sense of “positive restlessness”
Theme 1: Creating a Culture of Assessment

Assessment takes place across the University and at many levels. The systems of promotion and tenure evaluation, faculty review, program review, administrative office review, and staff performance evaluation are designed to ensure that we reflect regularly on how well we are meeting our goals as individuals and as an institution. This self-study describes the rigorous processes of curriculum review in place in each of the undergraduate colleges, as well as the mechanisms for individual course evaluations. Many units undergo accreditation reviews. The University reports each year to the Board of Regents, State of Iowa, on progress toward our strategic planning goals, and we benchmark ourselves frequently against our peers.

As this self-study highlights, however, assessment of student learning outcomes across academic and co-curricular programs is uneven, and in many areas we are not tracking and using data as evidence to help us improve units, programs, and services. In addition to completing the development of formal outcomes assessment plans for each of the University’s undergraduate majors—and implementing those plans—we must encourage other units to collect meaningful data and use them to improve performance. Our goal is to institutionalize a culture of assessment.

This culture shift must extend not only to undergraduate major programs but also to the General Education Program (a process the General Education Advisory Committee is positioned to begin), service courses (courses required by one college but delivered by another), and academic advising (the Academic Advising Center has begun to identify learning outcomes for advising, and will follow with an assessment plan). The shift also should extend to co-curricular programs. Several UI offices and departments report having established objectives for their co-curricular programs and services, but in many cases those objectives have more to do with student satisfaction or other departmental goals than with defining desired learning outcomes. Even among those with established objectives, many units do little to evaluate the effectiveness of their programming in a systematic way. This seems to stem from a lack of widespread knowledge about how to conduct meaningful assessment, and a lack of perceived need to do so. We need to find ways to train departmental staff to conduct meaningful assessments of their programs and services.

New efforts to move toward the goal of institutionalizing a culture of assessment—in addition to those already described—might include:

- The creation of a core assessment team, responsible for moving forward with systematic, holistic assessment efforts
- Development of an institution-wide strategic plan for assessment of undergraduate student learning
- Implementation of workshops to train faculty, staff, and students in effective assessment practices

We also must consider whether the University can do more to encourage the collection and dissemination of useful data about UI units, programs, and services. While conducting this special emphasis self-study, several subcommittees encountered difficulty gathering data they had hoped would be readily available. In part, this reveals that some offices simply have not collected data that would be valuable for assessment purposes. It also reflects the challenge presented by the University’s lack of an Office of Institutional Research.
Given our decentralized nature and tendency toward lean central administration, The University of Iowa has chosen not to establish an Office of Institutional Research. The administration might reconsider this choice, however, or at a minimum consider options such as a “virtual office of institutional research,” which would coordinate and leverage the expertise in existing, distinct units. We must also find ways, as noted above, to educate departmental and unit staff about the value of data they could, and should, collect for themselves.

The Student Success Team has created a Research Coordination Council (RCC), chaired by the director of Evaluation and Examination Services, to investigate ways to expand the University’s capacity and programs devoted to research and assessment of student success. The RCC’s charge will include making recommendations about new data collection efforts and about better dissemination of new and existing data to units that deal with undergraduate students.

The University of Iowa has been accepted to participate in the Higher Learning Commission’s Academy for Assessment of Student Learning. We expect to use the knowledge we gain as a result of participation in the academy to strengthen student learning outcomes assessment efforts.

**Theme 2: Communication, Collaboration, and “Silo-Busting”**

We have noted repeatedly in this self-study that The University of Iowa’s size and our decentralized and distributed nature serve us well in many ways. Because of our size, we can support a wide range of major programs and a remarkable array of opportunities for educationally purposeful co-curricular activities. Our distributed model, in many cases, keeps decision-making in the hands of those who know a program or constituency best. And, in many ways, decentralization encourages innovation and entrepreneurship.

These same characteristics, however, present some significant challenges. Decentralization complicates the development of policies that govern overall quality and consistency. Efficiency and effectiveness suffer when units with similar objectives fail to share expertise and resources—or worse, when they have a different philosophy or develop an unhelpful sense of competition with each other.

In much the same way that academic institutions and funding agencies have recognized, with increasing urgency, the need for cross-disciplinary interaction—to create lines of communication among the “academic silos” that have been built up over 50 years of exponential knowledge growth and the concomitant move toward focused academic specialization—so we must find ways to break down the academic and functional silos that have built up over time at The University of Iowa. We must find ways to foster more effective communication among individuals and units, better coordinate the activities of units and programs that have similar goals, and ensure that expertise and best practices in successful units and programs inform growth in other areas.

The theme of improved communication and coordination should inform all aspects of our operations so we can better fulfill our mission.

**Theme 3: Faculty Engagement**

According to the RISE report, one predictor of student persistence to the second year is the perception of having received effective teaching during the first year. The RISE study also demonstrated that even a single interaction with a faculty member can have a lasting impact on a student’s satisfaction with the University and/or with him- or
herself. These data illustrate the most immediate way in which faculty are central to student success. They also highlight the concept that interaction with students outside of the classroom might be considered one of the most important service activities a faculty member engages in.

This is why, for example, the Learning Communities Task Force (completing its work in fall 2007) has prioritized creating a program that brings students and faculty together in substantive ways. The hope is that this interaction will encourage students to continue engaging with faculty as they progress through their undergraduate careers. The program will also include a faculty development component.

Another area in which faculty are clearly central is outcomes assessment for academic programs. Faculty need to lead—and are leading—the effort to establish outcomes assessment plans for their undergraduate majors. Faculty must likewise be at the center of assessment of the General Education Program. It is the faculty who can ultimately effect a cultural shift from teaching courses to teaching students—that is, to assessing not what is being taught, but whether students are learning what they should be learning.

“Faculty engagement” emerged as a theme because there are many other ways in which faculty need to be engaged in student success initiatives—ways that touch on each of the focus areas outlined above, from fostering student engagement to creating healthy and supportive learning environments. Faculty members set expectations, model good decision making, and communicate the University’s message about what it means to be a UI student. Faculty are the heart of the University, and must be at the heart of efforts to address our challenges and advance our priorities. The University will achieve maximum success on the proposed initiatives only if faculty support these efforts actively.

Theme 4: Positive Restlessness

Throughout this self-study, we encountered a feeling of what Kuh et al. (2005b) refer to as “positive restlessness”: “a ‘can-do’ ethic that permeates . . . campuses [that are successful in the areas of student engagement and retention]—a tapestry of values and beliefs that reflect the institutions’ willingness to take on matters of substance consistent with their priorities” (Kuh et al., 2005b, p. 48). “Positive restlessness” means having the motivation to improve; those who demonstrate it “continuously monitor what they’re doing, where they are, and where they want to go, in order to maintain momentum” (Kuh et al., 2005b, p. 48).

The decision to conduct a special-emphasis self-study is evidence of that motivation and we hope it plays a role in cultivating that momentum. We began this section of the report by recounting efforts since 1999 to focus more systematically and meaningfully on improving the experiences and outcomes of undergraduates at UI; we noted that the special emphasis self-study was the next logical step in that endeavor. The decision to pursue a self-study of undergraduate education was, without question, a decision to “take on matters of substance consistent with [our] priorities.” In doing so, we hoped to gain a clear picture of where we are now with regard to undergraduate education—both what we are doing well and what needs improvement—and where we need to go from here if we are to fulfill the commitments of The Iowa Promise. We were pleased to discover that many of the individuals and units the self-study committees interviewed were engaged in discussions about how to do more and how to do better in support of student learning. They expressed eagerness to address challenges and to build on
success in ways that will either extend the benefits programs can offer, or extend the benefits of successful programs to more students. Further, they were eager to work with others across traditional barriers, as evidenced by the rapidly growing membership in the Student Success Team.

This growing sense of “positive restlessness” may be one of The University of Iowa’s greatest strengths. As the special emphasis self-study makes clear, we have much work to do. If we can cultivate and reward “positive restlessness” throughout the University community, we can tackle that work together in all the ways we serve our students and the larger community.