APPLICATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE HLC ASSESSMENT ACADEMY:
THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, JULY 2007

Recent Efforts: Our “Assessment Story”

Context

Several forces have converged at The University of Iowa to create a climate suitable for a renewed emphasis on assessment of student learning, including an emphasis on excellence in undergraduate education in the latest strategic plan, preparation of a self-study for Higher Learning Commission (HLC) reaccreditation, and calls for accountability in postsecondary education in general. These separate, though related, forces serve as the context and foundation for the University’s “assessment story.”

The first goal (of five) of the The Iowa Promise, The University of Iowa’s strategic plan for 2005-2010, focuses on undergraduate education: 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. The rationale for giving priority to undergraduate education in the strategic plan is stated in terms of the University’s mission: “The University considers excellent undergraduate education the core of its mission. In meeting this responsibility, we will provide high-quality curricular and cocurricular programs that encourage intellectual and physical vitality and help students acquire the habits of mind that sustain lifetime learning. We also will provide safe and healthy settings in which students can learn to lead and work with others, solve problems and serve their communities, and treat one another with integrity, civility, and respect.” The plan’s assertion that the University seeks to offer “excellent undergraduate education” and “high-quality experiences” implies a commitment and mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of curricular and cocurricular programs and to improve those programs based on evidence.

The University of Iowa also has been engaged in a self-study process in preparation for a reaccreditation site visit by the HLC in April 2008. Given the focus of the strategic plan on undergraduate education, the University sought, and was granted, the opportunity to conduct a special-emphasis self-study focused on all facets of undergraduate education at Iowa. In proposing the special emphasis, the University noted broad support for using the self-study process as a unique opportunity for assessment of, and a renewed commitment to, undergraduate students and their learning. As part of that renewed commitment, the Office of the Provost has initiated a range of activities and events related to assessment of student learning, the details of which are described later in this section.

Finally, the University leadership has acknowledged external calls for accountability for student learning, including via assessment. The University’s responsibility to the State of Iowa to provide “access to success” for its students as we implement our missions of teaching, research and service, has been a matter of public discussion on the part, for example, of Provost Michael Hogan. This responsibility includes commitment to self-scrutiny and improvement.

Specific Strategies
Although several of the University’s undergraduate majors (e.g., Engineering, Nursing, Teacher Education, Journalism) have long histories of assessment mandated by external accrediting bodies, and many faculty engage in effective assessment practices in their courses, we needed a systematic focus on student learning outcomes and assessment across the institution.

Therefore, in response to these converging forces, the University’s Office of the Provost initiated a variety of assessment-related activities beginning in the Spring of 2006 and continuing to the present:

- **May 2006**: The Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education asked all departments with undergraduate majors to develop clear and specific learning outcomes (due December 15, 2006) and plans to assess the achievement of those outcomes (due May 15, 2007).
- **2006-2007**: To support the departments’ efforts and foster systematic conversations about assessment, the Office of the Provost and the Center for Teaching initiated the following activities and events:
  - Workshops with external consultants on effective assessment practices (Dr. Douglas Eder, Arizona State University) and portfolio-based assessment (Professor John Zubizarreta (Columbia College (SC))).
  - Workshops for faculty on developing rubrics for assessment and using electronic technologies to foster and assess student learning.
  - Series of “brown bag lunch” conversations about outcomes assessment and student learning open to all faculty and professional staff.
  - Individual meetings and consultations on assessment between Office of the Provost staff and undergraduate departments.
  - In addition, the Office of the Provost has created a website of assessment resources; initiated a study, conducted by UI’s Center for Research on Undergraduate Education, of undergraduate student experiences and learning outcomes at Iowa; established a “research council” to foster research- and assessment-related projects to support undergraduate student success; and created a new position, Director of Student Success Initiatives, within the Office of the Provost to, among other things, coordinate and sustain ongoing assessment efforts.

**Results**

These efforts, taken together, have given us a good start at creating a climate in which assessment of student learning is a taken-for-granted element of excellent undergraduate education at Iowa. As of July 2007, almost all departments with undergraduate majors have specified learning outcomes and developed plans to assess those outcomes. Plans are being posted on the assessment website as a way to encourage keeping the plans, and discussions about improvement, alive. Throughout the past year, many faculty have commented on the energizing effect of conversations about what they and their departments want to accomplish with and for their undergraduate majors. Workshops and brown bag lunches have been well-attended by faculty and staff, reflecting motivation and enthusiasm for taking a systematic approach to student learning and assessment.

**Needs and Goals**
Although we have achieved a good beginning, it is just that – a beginning. We have a long way to go before we can say, with confidence, we have a “culture of assessment” at The University of Iowa. And, in the absence of such a culture, we would have difficulty meeting our goal of excellent undergraduate education and meeting our responsibility to our students and our other stakeholders for student learning and success. The primary concerns we face at this point are (1) we lack a central coordinating function for assessment and institutional research, (2) the focus of our efforts, so far, has been undergraduate majors only, and (3) we need to identify, and mobilize, strategies and resources to sustain our early efforts. It is for these reasons we seek entry into the HLC Assessment Academy.

Need #1: Coordinate, Sustain, and Expand Assessment Efforts in Undergraduate Curricula

Although almost all departments with undergraduate majors have developed learning outcomes and assessment plans, these efforts have taken place, for the most part, in isolation – isolation from other departments and isolation from consideration of general education curricula. And, although the Office of the Provost – in particular, the Senior Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education – has taken a leadership role in initiating assessment efforts in undergraduate curricula, to be sustainable, these efforts must have ongoing faculty leadership as well as commitment.

Goal #1a, Need #1: Coordinate and Sustain Efforts in Undergraduate Curricula

1. To create a “core” assessment team, responsible for moving forward with systematic and holistic assessment. The team will serve as the primary means of collaboration and communication about assessment of student learning across academic units as well as academic and student affairs entities (see Need #2). In addition, team members will serve as mentors and consultants on assessment for other faculty and academic units.

2. To develop and implement an institution-wide strategic plan for assessment of undergraduate student learning (see also Goal 1b and Need #2), including strategies for accountability for effective assessment. The “core” team will be responsible for monitoring the achievement, and effectiveness, of this plan.

3. To create a University Assessment Council to serve as an advisory panel for assessment at Iowa. This group will expand the influence and dissemination activities of the core team.

4. To create a series of workshops to train faculty, staff, and students in effective assessment practices, uses of electronic technologies in assessment, and in- and out-of-class pedagogies that support ongoing assessment of student learning.

Goal #1b, Need #1: Expand Assessment Efforts in Undergraduate Curricula

1. To create a Task Force on Assessment of General Education Outcomes. The role of this group is to identify desired outcomes of general education at Iowa and develop a plan for assessing those outcomes.

2. To identify effective assessment practices for General Education through interaction with faculty and staff at other institutions similar to, as well as different from, The University of Iowa.
3. To create and implement the assessment plan for General Education as part of the overall strategic plan for assessment of undergraduate student learning.

Need #2: Integrate Assessment of Curricular and Co-Curricular Student Learning

Assessment of student learning at Iowa has focused on undergraduate curricula. Although units within the Division of Student Services (e.g., University Housing) provide programs and services intended to support student success, few formal or systematic assessment efforts exist. In addition, assessment of academic outcomes has been limited, for the most part, to in-class experiences and we have paid little attention to out-of-class venues (e.g., undergraduate research, service learning) in which learning related to undergraduate majors can occur. Finally, we have yet to identify and assess the relationships between and among the various forms of curricular and co-curricular learning. As is the case with many large, complex universities, The University of Iowa can suffer at times from a lack of communication and engagement across the “silos” of academic and student affairs, making effective holistic assessment of student learning difficult.

Goals, Need #2:

1. To identify effective practices in assessing learning in co-curricular and out-of-class settings. Again, we would seek advice and expertise from other institutions; the Academy would be very useful in this regard.

2. To use the “core” assessment team and other groups (e.g., the University’s Student Success Team, student government) to consider ways in which academic and student affairs can collaborate on (1) implementing and integrating strategies for student learning and (2) assessing the outcomes of those strategies.

3. To host an annual Assessment Institute focusing on effective assessment practices within, and outside, the University.

Benefits and Potential Impact

All of the goals and efforts described in the previous section seek to serve the University’s overarching goal of improving undergraduate education and, in support of that goal, creating a “culture of assessment” regarding students and their learning. Our specific goals set forth strategies to improve student learning through systematic planning, ongoing review and evaluation, faculty leadership and responsibility, collaboration across academic units and between academic and student affairs, and broad dissemination of information about what works (and what doesn’t) and how we’re doing.

Participation in the HLC Assessment Academy would assist us in every aspect of this process. The Academy offers structures and resources far beyond what we could summon on our own; in particular, we would benefit from the critiques, feedback, expertise, and encouragement of the Academy leadership and colleagues at institutions similar to, and different from, Iowa. In addition, we look forward to opportunities to specify action projects and monitor our progress in a very public way. Finally, the University’s commitment of financial and human resources to participate in the Academy is a powerful sign to the University community and our stakeholders that undergraduate student learning and assessment are significant priorities.
Commitment and Capacity

The University of Iowa will have a new president on August 1, 2007; incoming President, Dr. Sally Mason, has served most recently as Provost at Purdue University. Although the arrival of a new president can create a sense of uncertainty about future directions for a university, Dr. Mason has expressed support for the priorities as stated in The Iowa Promise, including undergraduate education. The current provost, Michael Hogan, has XXXX

Funding to participate in the four years of the Assessment Academy has been budgeted through the Office of the Provost. We expect, too, to seek financial and human resources from units within the Division of Student Services, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the Center for Teaching. A resource base broader than the Office of the Provost also is essential for creating the partnerships for assessment we desire.

We are creating a “core group” of faculty, staff, and administrators to serve as the coordinating body for assessment efforts at Iowa. Included in this group are faculty who have played significant roles in the past year of assessment plan development and are visible faculty leaders. The group also will include staff from student affairs; in this way, we will begin to work toward achieving our goals for academic and student affairs collaboration on assessment of student learning. This entity also will serve as the primary force for implementing our goals for the Assessment Academy. In addition, we will construct a University Assessment Council, composed of collegiate associate deans and student affairs directors. This body will serve in an advisory capacity to the “core” assessment team, and will assist that group in disseminating learning, plans, and resources obtained through Academy participation. Finally, the University’s Student Success Team (SST), a group of approximately 65 staff, administrators, and faculty formed by the Senior Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, is in the process of creating action plans for student success for the 2007-2008 academic year; assessment of student learning across the breadth of undergraduate experiences is a priority for the SST. The individual and collective work of the Assessment Council and the SST will assist us in achieving our goal of creating a “culture of assessment” within the University.

These bodies will be in place and engaged in moving our assessment efforts forward whether we are selected to participate in the Assessment Academy or not. Involvement in the Academy would add immeasurably to these efforts by providing external expertise, structures, and collaboration to challenge and support us. As we noted at the beginning of this proposal, this is perfect time in the life of The University of Iowa to make significant strides in re-focusing on our mission of undergraduate education. Systematic, holistic assessment is necessary to make those strides and we are committed to any and all initiatives, including the Assessment Academy, to assist us in achieving a “culture of assessment.”