State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

PROGRAM APPROVAL & ASSESSMENT

Assessing Outcomes

Campuses can achieve high quality performance by requiring systematic attention to ensure that best educational practices are used in the academic programs and that best business practices are used in the management of the human, fiscal, and capital resources of the institution. American industry has shifted its understanding about how to achieve a quality product from an "end of the line" quality inspection approach to one that focuses on the processes that are used to achieve the end product. Similarly, higher education institutions look at the processes they use to produce desired outcomes in order to discover ways to increase their effectiveness. Continuous quality assessment means examining the quality of processes as well as the outcomes of processes.

Continuous quality assessment has long served as a foundation and inner logic of the academic tradition. Higher education sets excellence as its standard. A core belief of the faculty at Virginia's colleges and universities—and elsewhere—is that academic rigor and deep learning are best pursued by challenging oneself and one's students to the outer limit of ability.

At the same time that some of the lessons learned by business and industry are relevant for higher education, it is essential to acknowledge as well that there are fundamental differences between the two enterprises. Colleges and universities do not work to produce widgets. Rather, their mission is to develop the human mind. For that reason, the *1999 Virginia Plan for Higher Education* promotes the concept of continuous quality assessment—as distinct from continuous quality improvement—in recognition that infinite improvement inaptly objectifies the human mind.

Most importantly, continuous quality assessment entails placing the full brunt of responsibility for evaluating outcomes squarely on the shoulders of those responsible for delivering the outcomes. This Plan recommends changes in policy and governance that aim, among other things, to place full responsibility upon each public Virginia college and university for achieving results.

Virginia's system of higher education has made good progress in developing and using tools to assess academic programs, in part because the state code mandates that each public institution implement a system of academic program assessment and that SCHEV report on the findings in the biennial updates of the Virginia Plan for Higher Education. That reporting fell into disuse in recent years, but the institutions benefited nonetheless from the practices put in place. Over the past fifteen years, faculty support for, expertise in, and use of assessment activities has steadily grown.

While good progress has been made overall, some institutions have advanced further than others in weaving assessment into the fabric of teaching and learning on their campuses. Goal Two of this Plan recommends that Virginia's public and private colleges alike now deepen, expand, and enrich their use of assessment as a tool to support the broad aim of continuous quality assessment.

GOAL 2:   To strengthen the ongoing assessment of the programs and units at Virginia's colleges and universities by focusing on outcomes and value-added analysis.

Virginia's colleges and universities were early adopters of new models for assessing academic programs during the 1980s. Assessment practices are strong and widespread on most campuses. Some of Virginia's institutions have assessment programs that are considered as exemplars. Nevertheless, the new outcome-focused vision of quality, which is emerging at Virginia's public and private colleges and universities can only be achieved through the new, expanded approach to assessment described in the following recommendations.

Recommendations:

2.1 Revise the assessment guidelines.

Within the context of continuous quality improvement articulated in this Plan and on the principle that what is strong can always become stronger, the institutions and the Council staff should collaboratively review and revise the assessment guidelines. The purpose of this review is to identify the broad range of reasonable assessment practices that will be compatible with and effective in a system-wise audit procedure. The resulting revised guidelines should acknowledge, as do the current guidelines, that there are many valid approaches to assessment and that, in fact, strong programs intentionally use a variety of approaches to assessing student learning outcomes. The guidelines will work in tandem with accreditation standards, relying on and referring to such standards where appropriate.

Many of Virginia's public colleges and universities have developed thoughtfully designed and carefully executed assessment programs. Moreover, at many of the campuses there is a strong commitment on the part of faculty and administrators to use the collected information systematically to support campus decision-making. The active engagement of the faculty is essential to ensure that evidence collected through assessment is valued and put to use.

2.2   Formulate strategies for modifying the process to initiate academic programs.

Currently when campus leaders wish to develop a new academic program they must complete an elaborate process on the campuses. Such processes involve administrative review as well as curriculum committee review at the department, college, and institutional level, including approval from the Board of Visitors. After this process is completed, programs are submitted to the Council of Higher Education staff for review and preparation of recommendations for presentation to the Council. At times, institutions try to avoid it altogether by seeking General Assembly patronage and bypassing SCHEV.

To strengthen the process and to assure improved program development, the Council will work with institutions to develop new program approval procedures with Council-approved assessment plans. In developing such plans, attention must be paid to limit duplication of effort and to use, where possible, market influences to evaluate student demand for academic programs.

The modified program approval process will place greater responsibility on the institutions themselves, rather than Council staff, to evaluate the need for a new program and to evaluate the planning and development of the program. The Council staff will review program proposals to certify that the following issues have been covered: desired learning outcomes, program duplication, market demand, and a specific plan for assessing the proposed program.

The institution-developed proposal to initiate a new program will be available for review by Council members.

As part of making these modifications to the program approval process, institutions will also be required to submit an overall plan for the assessment of all academic programs. The overall guidelines for assessment plans will be revised to require a value-added approach to assessing student learning. The Council will review and approve the assessment plan for each institution. Council staff will periodically audit institutions to review the rigor of their implementation of their approved assessment plans, with particular attention given to programs that have been recently initiated.

2.3 Develop new mission-sensitive and student-centered (that is, case-sensitive) alternatives to the evaluation of graduation and retention rates and other indicators of student outcomes.

Two typical measures used to gauge student learning outcomes and institutional performance are retention rates and graduation rates. These measures, as most commonly used, do not adequately distinguish among differences in institutional mission, and student preparation; nor do they make adequate provision for the fact that many students today pursue post-secondary education to develop specific skills and knowledge without necessarily planning to obtain a baccalaureate degree. Finally, the current system for evaluating overall student performance does not adequately track students as they move from one institution to another. The Council is actively researching an approach that would better address these issues.

2.4 Develop a new mechanism for institutions to report to the Council, the Secretary of Education, the Department of Planning and Budget, and the General Assembly on their progress toward meeting the goals of their strategic plans, which will include an emphasis on assessment of outcomes.

The Appropriation Act requires institutions to report on their restructuring and strategic planning efforts. Both the institutions that produce these reports and the state officials who receive and use the reports have called for improvements in the reporting format and process. In order to provide a more useful tool, a new and integrated mechanism will be developed which will measure progress toward the goals outlined in their strategic plans as well as in this Plan.

2.5 Ensure that the Council's policies for granting approval to out-of-state and private institutions to offer academic programs within Virginia are consistent with highest quality higher education.

The Council intends to undertake a full review of its policies, procedures, and regulations for institutional approval to ensure that the highest quality educational programs are delivered.

At each of the discussions held to develop the 1999 Plan, participants expressed a strong, shared sense of the defining characteristic of excellence in Virginia's system of higher education as a *system*. For Virginia's system of public and private colleges and universities, quality means offering students extensive educational choices that provide them the climate and programs to achieve the highest performance possible.

Background:

        In November 1998, the Council approved the following statement relating to program decentralization:

> BE IT RESOLVED that the Council of Higher Education approves the concept of streamlining the program-approval process so that it focuses on intended outcomes of the proposed program and how the institution plans to judge whether the program is meeting its intended outcomes; and adopting a program-review process that includes a three-to-five year review of new programs, the Council's approval of institutional program-review policies, and periodic staff audits of institutions to see if they are following their policies for program reviews. Be it further resolved that the Council direct the staff to work with institutions to develop new program approval and review policies and procedures and to bring them to the Council no later than its April 1999 meeting.

Policy Rationale: *Decentralization of Program Approvals*

        Decentralization of program approval authority to the campuses is designed to place the responsibility for the creation and on-going evaluation of academic programs with those best placed to understand the needs, contexts and opportunities on a particular campus – the faculty and administrative leadership of the campus. In regards to the merits of decentralization of program approval Terrance MacTaggart in *Seeking Excellence Through Independence* argues:

> Intensifying central authority along with sharply increasing the bureaucracy needed to enforce their judgments, however, is less effective than a relatively more free-market approach to providing the many benefits of public higher education. Management strategies that made sense in times of rapid growth in enrollments, resources, programs, and geographic reach do not answer to the serious challenges facing a mature industry that is adjusting to new fiscal austerity, higher expectations for performance, and the puzzles and opportunities posed by communication technology. Instead there are more effective, less coercive alternatives that suggest that the iron law can be broken to achieve better results.[1]

        This policy allows institutions to respond rapidly to changing employment demands. It also allows institutions to establish programs that are subject to market forces of enrollment, employer demand and available, currently existing, campus resources. It is important to note that under this proposed policy institutions must initiate new programs by reallocating existing resources rather than expecting new resources from the state. This funding approach will encourage campuses to make strategic decisions that reflect campus priorities, values and mission.

        In creating new programs, institutions may develop programs that compete with those of other pubic and private institutions for student enrollments; however, institutions are encouraged whenever possible to work cooperatively with other institutions in the development of new programs and to develop innovative ways to share resources among regional institutions. Under the proposed policy, market forces will play a larger role in determining which programs will

---

[1] Terrence J. MacTaggart, ed., *Seeking Excellence Through Independence* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998)

thrive on particular campuses than they have under the previous centralized program approval policy. However, when institutions decide to initiate new programs they should notify the Council so they can be assigned a six-digit CIP code

Programs initiated by institutions must be consistent with their stated institutional missions. Programs that are not consistent with the institutional mission (e.g. new doctoral programs, health or engineering programs in institutions that do not currently have them) may not be initiated until the Council has approved a mission change for the institution. Proposals for programs that a) are outside the institution's mission and b) are at degree levels above those for which the institution currently is authorized by the Council and the General Assembly may not be initiated until authorization to develop such programs is received.

In return for providing this increased flexibility the State Council of Higher Education will expect campuses to develop suitable accountability measures to ensure that the needs and interests of the state in providing the highest quality academic programs are being met.

In return for delegating to the campuses control over deciding which academic programs they will offer, the State Council of Higher Education will require campuses to increase the level of assessment activity focused on outcomes. Each program will be required to develop a statement of specific outcomes, including student learning outcomes, for the program. These outcomes will be rigorously assessed on a systematic and continuing basis through a variety of approaches, including assessment of entry level skills and abilities as well as exit level skills and abilities in relation to these specified outcomes.

More importantly, taking a cue from industry attempts to raise quality standards, the primary focus of the assessment efforts must be on the educational processes tied to producing the desired outcomes. In their article "Defining and Ensuring Quality in Higher Education," Jonathan D. Fife and Steven M. Janosik argue that "….the inspection model as the primary method of judging quality has gone out of favor. Yes, quality inspections are still performed. But there is an understanding that 'you cannot inspect quality in'." They go on to assert, "Therefore, higher education is not served well by defining quality as a static condition. Quality is best viewed as a process and best defined through an assessment of the processes that are functioning to meet the ever-changing expectations of the stakeholders."

While Fife and Janosik go on to argue for use of a specific approach to assessment, the Baldrige assessment process, the important issue which they raise is that unless assessment of student learning outcomes is tied to looking at the educational processes involved in creating those outcomes, campuses are unlikely to learn which teaching approaches are most effective in producing those outcomes with which students. Thus in order to achieve continuous improvement in the teaching/learning process on campus and thus to achieve higher quality educational and service experiences for students, faculty must be asked to engage in using their scholarly skills to develop approaches and interpret assessment results. While administrative personnel in institutional research and/or assessment offices may carry out the mechanics of assessment efforts and do preliminary analysis of the evidence collected, faculty in the programs must be intimately involved in the design and evaluation of the assessment activity, if the assessment effort is to move beyond "quality inspection" to "quality improvement." Since faculty control the teaching and learning process, only they can effectively use the information collected to change that process and thereby improve quality. Thus the State Council of Higher Education will require that campuses develop a program for Continuous Quality Assessment specifically to include Student Learning Outcomes.

Continuous Quality Assessment

Institutions will strengthen the rigor of the following operations:

1. **Maintain on-going, systematic, program–specific assessment procedures based on examination of stated outcomes, including student learning outcomes:**

- Develop clearly stated student learning outcomes for all programs of study;
- Create on a yearly basis a set of question(s) related to student learning outcomes that will drive the assessment process;
- Choose an appropriate set of approaches to develop evidence in relation to these questions;
- Examine students' entry and exit skills, ability, and knowledge levels related to desired student learning outcomes.

2. **Submit biennial reports on the assessment questions and assessment approaches being used by programs that will be shared with SCHEV.   These reports should:**

- State specific outcomes for each program;
- Identify the specific questions being pursued by each program;
- Specify the assessment approaches being used to answer these questions;
- Specify the character of the client groups being assessed, i.e. cohort group over four years, cross-sectional group, first year students, community beneficiaries, employers, governmental agencies, etc.

3. **Integrate assessment results into the decision-making processes of the campus:**

- Incorporate assessment of outcomes as a significant factor into campus program review procedures;
- Develop reports/documents on assessment findings for each program that can be shared with current students as well as with prospective students and parents;
- Document specific improvements to the teaching and learning process connected to assessment efforts;
- Devote at least one departmental/unit meeting a year to the discussion of the implications of the program assessment results from the previous year.

4. **Engage in post-assessment audit procedures conducted by SCHEV staff not less frequently than once every five years or more frequently than once every three years:**

- Provide SCHEV staff with access to all the assessment documents from all programs on campus;
- Share evidence of improvements that have been made to the teaching and learning process as a result of assessment efforts;
- Make available the documents that are being shared with current students as well as prospective students and parents;
- Offer feedback on the impact of the assessment process and share directions for future assessment efforts

The SCHEV staff will provide feedback on campus documents related to Continuous Assessment of Outcomes that will be shared with the members of the Council of Higher Education on a regular basis. SCHEV staff will maintain files on the campus assessment documents—particularly the Biennial Reports on the Continuous Assessment of Outcomes.

Through the Decentralization of Program Approval Policy, SCHEV seeks to provide campuses with greater latitude in the creation of new academic programs as well as providing for assessment mechanisms that will provide greater public accountability for the quality of academic programs. Through this program SCHEV also seeks to foster an increased awareness of the value of evidence in campus resource and other decision-making processes. Ralph Wolfe of the Western States Association calls this "creating a culture of evidence."   Through this policy SCHEV seeks the development of evidence that will be credible both within the campus community as well as to external publics about the quality of education being provided to students. Such evidence can be connected to the teaching and learning process that will allow continuous improvement in the quality of the educational experiences of all students enrolled in Virginia institutions.