Part III: Educational Effectiveness

1. The Educational Effectiveness Approach

As we reported in our 1995 report to WASC, in direct response to a recommendation from the WASC team that visited the campus in 1992, the University initiated campus-wide discussion concerning the supports and structures necessary to establish a coordinated approach to assessment of educational effectiveness. An early result of this campus conversation was the insertion of the following objective in the 1995 Strategic Plan:

Led by Academic Affairs, the campus should develop a thoughtful, widely ratified and carefully implemented agenda of assessment and evaluation of activities to better identify student needs and provide evaluative information useful for improving academic programs.

Following extensive consultation and collaboration among faculty, staff, and administrators, the Academic Senate recommended and the President approved a campus Assessment Policy (PS 98-06) that lays out the objectives and guiding principles for our collective efforts to assess student learning and development and to use what we learn from these comments to improve our educational effectiveness. Among these guiding principles are that: (1) CSULB assessment practices should meet professionally recognized standards of best practice; (2) assessment practices should be designed to serve the changing needs of the University over time; (3) forms of assessment may vary across the University, as appropriate to particular units; (4) priorities for assessment activities should be based upon broad consultation among faculty, staff, and students; (5) units should develop and implement ongoing assessment plans to provide useful feedback in planning; (6) assessment activities should provide feedback to students that guide them in their university careers; (7) the General Education program should develop an ongoing assessment plan similar to that of academic units; (8) the Program Review process should frame significant assessment questions appropriate to the departments and programs being reviewed; and (9) results of assessment activities are to be used for the purpose of improving programs, and are not to be used in personnel actions. The policy also specifically incorporates the “Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning” that have been promulgated by the American Association for Higher Education.

In addition to creating an Assessment Policy, the University has also moved to establish an effective structure for coordination of assessment activities. At the time the policy was adopted, the Academic Senate established a standing Assessment Committee that includes faculty, staff, student, and administrative members and is charged with recommending general policies on assessment, reviewing campus assessment priorities, and both stimulating and providing guidance for assessment-related activities. In addition, in 1998, the Provost demonstrated direct concern for the area of assessment by altering the assigned responsibilities of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Academic Personnel to include Planning and Assessment, and—based on advice from the Academic Senate—appointed a faculty member to serve half-time as Assessment Coordinator for the campus. In practice, the Assessment Committee, Assessment Coordinator, and Associate Vice President work closely together on resource and planning issues related to learning assessment efforts on campus, as well as to encourage and facilitate faculty involvement in such efforts.
In addition to establishing the necessary infrastructure to support learning assessment initiatives on the scale necessary, the Division of Academic Affairs has directed approximately $125,000 in annual permanent funding to support faculty activities in the area of assessment (the cost of the coordinator’s time is also paid from this budget). The bulk of these funds—over $100,000 per year—is distributed in small grants to individuals, teams, and units (in both Academic Affairs and Student Services), on the basis of proposals that are peer reviewed by the Assessment Committee. From the inception of the Assessment Awards program in the Fall 1998 through the Fall 2001, fifty-three Assessment Awards have been granted to individuals, teams, and departments. To disseminate information on these grant-funded activities, all successful proposals are made available on the Assessment web site. Also, grant recipients are asked to present their findings at regularly scheduled workshops conducted by the Center for Faculty Development, their departments, and their colleges. These projects have led to the modification of curricula in many departments—for example, in the Center for Public Policy and Administration and the departments of Biological Sciences, Communication Studies, Science Education, and History.

Working closely with the Assessment Coordinator, the Assessment Committee has begun to make significant progress in meeting its charge. It has held two campus-wide retreats on assessment, in 1998 and 1999, each of which was attended by approximately 100 faculty and staff, as well as assisting with assessment retreats held by three colleges (Business Administration, Health and Human Services, and Liberal Arts). It has also provided formal training sessions in the area of learning outcomes assessment at both the General Education Summer Institute (GESI) and General Education Winter Institute (GEWI), and has established an Assessment “Talent Bank”—a list of faculty and staff members who are willing and able to serve as expert consultants to teams and units that are embarking on assessment projects on which they need advice.

The Assessment Committee has been so active in the practical area of advancing specific assessment activities on campus that it has not, until recently, focused on that aspect of its charge that relates to specifying overall assessment policies and priorities. The committee turned to this task in Spring 2001, and in the current year will be developing position papers on assessment of student outcomes for distribution to all faculty and appropriate staff and student groups for discussion and input. The purpose of these papers will be to develop detailed statements of campus-level goals and objectives, and plans for assessment of those goals and objectives, in the near future. A number of departments have already established goals and learning outcomes for their majors which are posted on the web, and some have full assessment plans. An objective for 2001-2002 is to assist all departments in developing such plans, consistent with expectations of the CSU Accountability Plan.

Another principle in the University’s Assessment Policy that has been a driver of significant change in the campus culture is the inclusion of significant assessment questions and data in department program reviews. Drawing heavily on the American Association of Colleges and Universities document, “Program Review and Educational Quality in the Major” (1992), the campus “Framework for Program Review” lists “outcomes assessment” as one of the eight areas that must be discussed in a departmental program review self-study. The “Framework” specifically follows the AAC&U recommendations on the use of outcomes assessment in program review, incorporating the following language on the subject:

A key ingredient in successful program review is the quality of evidence documenting the educa-
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This evidence should assess the quality of student learning. It should be aggregate, focusing on the program and not on individual students or courses. It should be derived from multiple assessment strategies; no one approach can provide adequate information.

CSULB has had a systematic program review process in place for several years. Incorporation of an outcomes assessment component is a relatively recent development. Consequently, due to the cyclical scheduling of individual departments’ program reviews, there are few models, so far, for successful incorporation of assessment in these reviews. Three recent good examples, however, are the departments of Philosophy, History and Computer Engineering and Computer Science. The accomplishments of the Philosophy department are particularly noteworthy. One of the department’s initiatives described in its 2000-2001 program review is a model Assessment Plan, including statements of objectives and learning goals, as well as descriptions of the varied means by which these objectives are assessed. The June 2001 departmental response to the completed review describes some of the curricular revisions that have been undertaken as a consequence of student surveys in connection with the review.

At the same time that the program review process is coming to emphasize outcomes assessment more explicitly, Academic Affairs has instituted a “Faculty of the Future” planning process. This initiative, which has been developed by the Senior Management Council (including the Provost, senior Academic Affairs staff, and the deans), seeks to connect program review results directly to resource allocation decision-making, particularly in the area of faculty allocations. This objective is reflected in the Division of Academic Affairs Mid-Range Goals, which has set as a specific objective for the current academic year: “In collaboration with appropriate governance bodies, implement an improved Program Review process that integrates ongoing program assessment and planning activities.” As the first step in the annual process to determine allocation of new faculty appointments for the following academic year, the Office of Academic Affairs asks departments to address, among other questions, “What have been the significant findings and recommendations in recent program reviews (particularly by external reviewers and/or accrediting agencies)?” Outcomes assessment results, of course, will naturally come to be an important aspect of such reported “findings.”

The process of strengthening these connections between assessment and program review and between program review and planning is thus well under way. Faculty governance has also been working in this area. In 2000-2001, the Academic Senate charged an ad hoc Committee to Study Program Review to develop recommendations on a number of issues, including:

The assessment question. How can we use program reviews more effectively to determine the ways in which departments and programs are establishing and measuring student learning outcomes, as the CSU Accountability Process and WASC accreditation require? What kind of support and training do departments need to assess teaching and learning? What kind of training do the reviewers need?

The initial recommendations of the ad hoc Committee have been forwarded to a newly-established Academic Senate council, the Program Review and Academic Planning Council. The linking of these concepts in the title of this new council reflects our institutional intent to ensure that assessment-based program review will be linked directly to general aca-
ademic planning. Given the importance of shared governance to the success of any campus initiative at CSULB, such institutionalization of purpose is a critical step in ensuring permanence for this connection. The new council is certain to provide useful input to the further development of the Academic Affairs resource allocation process.

To summarize these linkages, once the system is fully mature, the assessment of goals, objectives, and learning outcomes will inform the CSULB program review process, and the program review results in turn will inform the Division’s short- and mid-range planning, as well as the annual resource allocation process. The enhanced institutional framework discussed earlier in this section is designed to strengthen these linkages and ensure continuity in the program review and planning cycle. Most importantly, however, information that is gathered in the systematic assessment activities of academic units already increasingly provides the basis for curriculum revision and improvement.

The significant initiatives within the Division of Academic Affairs linking assessment strategies and outcomes, on the one hand, with planning and resource allocations, on the other, are consistent with our institution-wide commitments, as articulated in the cross-divisional planning document, **Strategic Planning Mid-Range Goals, 2001-2004**. The specific planning area of the Mid-Range Goals that guides on-going assessment activities is Planning Area VII, “Assessment, Quality and Accountability.” Especially relevant are the following two priorities in this planning area:

- Track key indicators of quality of instruction and services as enrollment grows rapidly in the three-year planning period.
- Encourage and support quality improvement programs in campus divisions and units based on respectively appropriate frameworks (e.g., academic assessment, program review, and balanced scorecard).

The key campus constituencies share a collective commitment to developing an “assessment culture”—i.e., ongoing use of assessment for program planning and resource decisions. The appropriate infrastructure to support this commitment is in place, both in the planning and decision-making framework utilized by senior University administrators and in our agencies of shared governance. If progress has not been as rapid in some areas of this effort as we might have liked, it is because of our philosophical commitment to a decentralized approach to institutional change. We believe that, where student learning is concerned, the establishment of a genuine “assessment culture” must begin with every faculty member in his or her classroom and in individual departments as they shape their respective objectives. Consequently, our incentive programs in the area of assessment have been geared to support individual and departmental activities, rather than to design and impose a single University-wide approach. We are convinced that this has been the right approach—one that will ensure that our “assessment culture” will be solidly grounded and embraced by the entire University community as a positive development, rather than feared as a threat to tradition.

We are resolved, however, to move steadily ahead. The immediate agenda includes development of assessment plans by all departments, as well as furtherance of the goal of meaningful assessment of the revitalized General Education program—its constituent elements and the program as a whole. In 2001-2002, we will develop baseline data for programmatic assessment of General Education and provide broad-scale training of faculty in how to establish learning-centered objectives and measurement rubrics in their General Education courses. In addition, we are commit-
ted to developing more detailed guidelines for academic program review to ensure that all academic units are explicitly committed to program improvement through analysis of assessment data. This is a major challenge: we must establish a uniform “culture of evidence” throughout the campus. We are committed to meeting this challenge.