3. Supporting Evidence

As stated in the Introduction to the Educational Effectiveness section (page 43), the campus has followed a consciously decentralized model of assessment—a model consistent with our practices of shared governance and decision-making leading to institutional change. To repeat, our incentive programs in the area of support have been shaped to help individual faculty members and academic departments develop objectives and measures relevant to their own specific programs. We have not proposed a single “grand design.” As might be expected, not all departments, programs, and colleges have moved at the same rate in developing student outcomes, learning objectives, and measures to assess progress toward those objectives. The table of selected assessment activities reflects not only the diversity of approaches that have been developed across the University, but also the increasing momentum of such efforts.

Looking at the cycles of activity in program and curricular assessment in the past five years, it is clear that the “early-adopters” have expanded and deepened their assessment activities and that the number of departments and programs engaged in such work has steadily increased. It is also the case that many departments have now moved beyond the initial stages of defining desired learning outcomes and assessment tools, and have already made curricular and program changes on the basis of the evidence gathered. It is for these reasons that we believe that our essentially decentralized process, prodded and assisted by the Assessment Coordinator and campus Assessment Committee, has been the correct course.

This section presents detailed summaries of a cross-section of these assessment activities. Together, we believe, these representative activities provide solid evidence that the campus is making good progress toward our shared goal of developing useful measures of educational effectiveness—that is, creating an authentic “assessment culture” that can ensure continuous improvement in our academic programs. We have chosen to describe here a range of activities that represents the variety of types of assessment activities in which departments and programs are engaged. For most of the examples discussed here, other representative undertakings of the same type might just as well have been selected for discussion. These case studies provide examples of curricular transformations based on several types of assessment activities, including participation in development of K-16 standards in discipline, development of common standards across a multiple-section course, use of embedded portfolio assessment, and pre-and post-testing of students. In addition, examples are provided which reflect assessment of skills across departments and the restructuring of an entire major program based on sequential skill development, and a college-wide continuous quality improvement process, respectively. In addition to presenting these case studies, we include a brief discussion of a significant method of off-campus validation of our on-campus efforts: the tracking of our students’ performance on licensure and other national examinations.

(1) Course Transformation Based on Participation in Development of K-16 Standards:

The History department has been involved for the past several years in a national initiative to develop K-16 standards and assessments with the Quality in Undergraduate Education (QUE) project funded by the Pew Educational Trust. In conjunction with
its work on this project, the department has undertaken a major transformation of its core methodology course for history majors. One of the most critical elements in the transformation has been the incorporation of K-14 standards and strategies for assessment. The results of this process, in turn, have informed two related lines of work. At the national level, the QUE project has built upon the department’s assessment results as it furthers its work on K-16 standards and assessments. And, within the department itself, the process developed to transform the methodology course is now being used to re-conceptualize the major course of study that culminates in a senior-level seminar. This has included the explicit identification of sets of “mechanical skills” and “analytical skills” that must be mastered in the methodology course, and are to be built upon in other courses in the major. Faculty who teach upper-division courses in the major are constructing syllabi that build upon the explicit outcomes expectations of the methodology course, and are beginning to use a common rubric for measurement of student achievement in basic skills areas. This work on development of standards and assessment strategies appropriate to the History major is being supported through a campus-based Assessment Grant.

(2) Course Transformation Based on Development of Common Standards and Assessment of Outcomes Across a Multi-Section Course:

Again with benefit of the Assessment Grant program, the Department of Political Science has embarked on a very successful transformation of the highly subscribed General Education course, POSC 100 (American Government). The department faculty developed a standards-based course outline that included embedded assessment in the form of hands-on civic education simulations and service learning modules. Changes to the course are to be based on faculty assessment of student performance on these embedded assessment activities. Although the project is in its first year, tentative results have been highly positive. The department is continuing to develop multi-media packages to support the embedded assessment activities, and will review regularly the success of these activities in producing the desired student learning outcomes.

(3) Course Transformation Based on Evaluation of Embedded Portfolio Assessment:

The faculty responsible for both pre-baccalaureate and General Education English Composition instruction has undertaken an ambitious program of course development based on use of student portfolios as embedded assessment. As the Coordinator of the Composition Program has written, “the portfolio system is both cause and effect of developments” in these courses, in that “instructors use it to judge student performance levels but also to gauge effectiveness of instruction and to identify new skill areas.” Following a systematic and rigorous “range-finding” exercise, faculty review portfolios in teams of four to assess quality of student performance vis-à-vis agreed upon desired learning outcomes. In addition to providing a sound basis for assessment of individual student learning, these common portfolio readings have led to significant changes in the way the composition courses are organized and taught. In the pre-baccalaureate course, ENGL 001, for example, portfolio assessment has led to a greater emphasis on reading-based, argumentative writing based on academic readings, as opposed to expressionist narrative; there is greater insistence on use of evidence and on producing thesis-driven papers. In the basic introductory composition course, ENGL 100, portfolio assessment has produced a shift to requiring longer, more heavily documented papers and greater emphasis on assignments that require critical thinking. Readings assigned in ENGL 100
have also come to include more works that are academic in focus and provide multiple perspectives.

Another good example of assessment by portfolio can be found in the Teacher Education Department. During the first cycle of the Assessment Grants program, the department was funded to conduct a pilot portfolio project on the use of authentic assessments in the Emergency Permit Induction Program, a program designed to meet the credentialing needs of emergency permit teachers. The project was led by two faculty members in the department who are nationally recognized experts on portfolio assessment. The success of the project drew campus-wide attention to the portfolio assessment approach. Numerous workshops on portfolio assessment have been offered through the Center for Faculty Development in order to inform other individual faculty and department teams who were interested in the approach. As a result, the practice of portfolio assessment is spreading throughout the University. Several departments, including the Center for Public Policy and Administration and History, in addition to the English Composition program, have begun to incorporate portfolios into their assessment of student learning.

(4) Transformation of Curriculum Based on Pre- and Post-Testing

The establishment of reliable baseline information is, of course, an important step in devising strategies for assessing student progress toward desired learning outcomes. Thus, the concept of assessing progress (and effecting curricular improvements) through pre- and post-testing of students has been adopted by various departments and programs. Two of the best examples of this approach on campus are the Department of Communication Studies and the College of Business Administration.

As a major player in the General Education program—and the main source of expertise for departments that hope to advance the Foundation skill of oral communication in their own General Education courses—the Communication Studies department has considerable motivation to devise clear learning outcomes and effective assessment strategies in oral communication. To its credit, the department has been among the most active departments on campus in developing outcomes and assessment strategies. One strategy that has been effectively employed by Communication Studies is that of measurement by means of pre- and post-testing. The results are informing not only courses in the Communication Studies major program, but also General Education courses in other departments that are charged with improving students’ oral communication skills.

Again with support through the campus Assessment Grants program, the Communication Studies department has embarked on a systematic, multi-year investigation of student learning in the department’s General Education offerings in oral communication. Following up on the results of the department’s self-study in 1997, faculty began work on assessing the proficiency of first-year students in all of the department’s General Education courses. Using standardized measures of communication proficiency developed by the National Communication Association, pre- and post-performance was assessed in three key areas of communication: communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, and communication competency.

The results of three years of such assessments have been used to produce significant modifications in three of the department’s four Foundation-level General Education courses. In both COMM 110 (Interpersonal Communication) and COMM 132 (Small
Group Discussion), instructors were required to include in their classes an instructional unit on organizing and delivering a speech, as well as an additional public speaking assignment. In COMM 130 (Public Speaking), the department used assessment results to revise lectures and assignments for the persuasive speech section of the course. These course modifications have been overseen, in each case, by designated course coordinators to ensure their inclusion in all sections of the affected courses. The department will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the revised courses through continued use of the pre- and post-testing strategy. Moreover, based on the useful results of this in-department assessment of oral competencies, Communication Studies is spearheading the development of a Pre-Entrance Oral Communication Proficiency Test that might be administered to all incoming freshmen, similar to the existing placement examinations in Math and English.

Because of the key role played by the Communication Studies department in establishing rubrics for oral communication skills throughout the General Education curriculum, the results of the department’s assessments will also inform curricular modifications in General Education courses offered by other departments that advance oral communication skills.

The College of Business Administration (CBA) has also adopted pre- and post-testing of majors as a central assessment strategy. In the Spring 2000 semester, the CBA decided to implement a comprehensive, systematic, and ongoing assessment program that would inform continuous program improvement. Among the steps that were taken to implement this program were administration of pre-tests to first- and second semester juniors enrolled in the introductory course to the major (CBA 300), and of post-tests to final-semester Business Administration majors enrolled in the MGMT 425 capstone course. After considerable research, the CBA decided to utilize standardized instruments—specifically, the California Critical Thinking Test and the DANTES program developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which consists of several subject-specific standardized tests for awarding college credit. From the DANTES Standardized Subject Tests (DSST), four topics were selected: Organizational Behavior, Financial Accounting, Human Resource Management, and Finance. In addition, the CBA has administered to both populations a locally developed Written Communication essay test.

Because the CBA found that the DSST lacked appropriate fit with some of its objectives for students, a new exit examination has been chosen for administration in Spring 2002 (the Major Field Test in Business, offered by ETS). Analysis of the early results of this pre- and post-testing is ongoing. As in the case of the Communication Studies department, the results of the exit exams will be used to monitor individual student achievement as well as the overall effectiveness of the CBA’s curriculum, and to effect course modifications deemed appropriate. The CBA included this assessment strategy as a central component of the “balanced scorecard” approach that served as the underpinning for its application for a 2001-2002 Baldridge-sponsored California Prospector Award.

(5) Assessment of Skills Across Departments

Our new General Education Policy requires students to demonstrate a set of “advanced writing skills,” including analysis, synthesis, application of knowledge, and critique. This demonstration is expected in the upper-level Capstone courses now under development (please see pages 66-67). With the help of an award from the Assessment Grants program, a team led by a member of the English Composition faculty has accom-
plished the necessary first step in developing the explicit expectations for these Capstone courses, by assessing the writing skills expected by faculty who teach upper division courses in several departments in the College of Liberal Arts. Based on information (including course descriptions, syllabi, and writing assignments) provided by thirteen faculty members representing nine different departments, this team has extracted a set of common objectives that will provide the basis for reformulation of the Advanced Composition course (ENGL 300). This course redesign is currently underway.

Since the development of Capstone courses for the General Education curriculum is a major campus initiative in 2001-2002, the learning outcomes that have been identified in this cross-disciplinary writing assessment project will be useful to a large number of departments.

(6) Restructuring of Major Program Based on Sequential Skills Development

In 1997-1998, the Center for Public Policy and Administration (CPPA) undertook its first major curricular revision in twenty years, beginning the process with an electronic version of the Delphi technique to solicit input on desired student and program outcomes. Use of this technique allowed the CPPA to invite a wide range of participants to contribute to the initial information collection, as well as encouraged the faculty to be actively involved. Participants—including public managers, state and federal government agencies, and academics in other Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs—were asked to respond in four successive rounds of questioning, moving from identification of skills that MPA graduates should possess, through rank-ordering of the responses obtained in that first round, and then sorting of these desired outcomes into the various courses of the program at CSULB. The CPPA faculty then discussed and reviewed the results of the Delphi exercise, analyzed the lists of knowledge and skill items generated by the practitioners, produced “groupings” of like skills and knowledges, and then—in the final step—agreed upon a design of seven required and five elective courses to define the MPA degree. Specific skill and knowledge components were then linked with individual courses. The result is a revised outcomes-based curriculum with model syllabi that CPPA faculty are expected to follow.

As mentioned earlier, CPPA faculty have also adopted student portfolio assessment as a means to evaluate the effectiveness of the new curriculum design.

(7) College-wide Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

Like the College of Business Administration, the College of Engineering has adopted a college-wide assessment strategy that is responsive to its professional accreditation agency (ABET: the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology). Its strategy is a “Three-Loop Program Assessment and Enhancement Process.” The three “loops” of activity are: (1) the Assessment and Enhancement Loop overseeing the broad picture of educational mission and goals and how they are being achieved; (2) the Program Enhancement Loop, administered at the Department level; and (3) the Course Enhancement Loop, planned and executed by faculty. Each of the “loops” rely heavily on satisfaction surveys—of students, graduates, and employers—as well as on in-class student performance assessments. Activities and improvements that have been undertaken at both college and department levels (including specific course revisions) are described in detail in the College’s web-based self-study.
External Validation of Educational Effectiveness:

In addition to the many internal assessment activities that departments and colleges are using to measure and improve their educational effectiveness, the University relies on external validation measures, as well. Most notably, these include the several licensure and other national examinations that are required of successful graduates in a number of professional preparation programs. The list of representative professional licensing pass rates provides detailed data on pass rates for CSULB students on a wide variety of such examinations. Most of the departments in which students sit for such examinations have begun to use these data as information to be used in the systematic consideration of curricular strengths and weaknesses. These data are also integrated into our own internal program review processes.

Conclusion

The examples of assessment activities described herein—reflecting varying levels of sophistication and widely differing approaches—only scratch the surface of the rich “assessment culture” that has begun to flourish on our campus. If many departments are still at early stages of their work on developing objectives and measurement tools, it is highly encouraging that the models developed by “early adopters”—such as the portfolio approach pioneered on our campus by the English Composition faculty and the Teacher Education Department—have been disseminated to other departments and, in turn, have been adopted. To repeat the theme of our discussion of our institution’s “Educational Effectiveness Approach” (Part III, Section 1), we are gratified that building from local initiatives—the hard work of individual faculty members in their own classes and individual department faculties working together on the common issues of their discipline—has proven to be so productive. That said, we are cognizant that we must continue to strengthen the infrastructure of support and professional development that is needed to sustain these efforts. We are committed to such a course.