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University of Colorado at Denver

Progress Report on the 2001 Site Visit by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

March 1, 2004

Background

The Higher Learning Commission (Commission) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools conducted a site visit for the accreditation of the University of Colorado at Denver (CU-Denver) in 2001. As a result of the visit, the Commission required a progress report from CU-Denver “on the program of assessment of educational outcomes.” This progress report is presented to the Commission in response to this requirement.

In this report, we first describe the specific actions taken by CU-Denver administrators and faculty, since 2001, to strengthen our program of outcomes assessment. Next, we describe progress to date in complying with the Commission’s specific recommendations (p. 35 of the 2001 site visit report), followed by a description of additional efforts in the area of outcomes assessment. Finally, we conclude with plans for ongoing and future activities to continue to strengthen our outcomes assessment program. A number of appendices are attached to the report.

Actions Taken Since 2001 to Strengthen CU-Denver’s Program of Outcomes Assessment

CU-Denver administrators reacted swiftly to the identified weakness, in the 2001 site visit report, regarding the assessment of student learning outcomes. An Outcomes Assessment Task Force was created in the spring of 2001, chaired by the Acting Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. The task force was comprised of faculty representatives from all schools, colleges, and the library, as well as representatives from the Office of Institutional Research, the Learning and Technology Lab, the Office of Teaching Effectiveness, and Faculty Assembly. The task force met regularly from late spring until August 2001, and most members attended the June 2001 AAHE Assessment Conference in Denver. The minutes from the task force meetings are in Appendix A, and the final task force report (dated August 31, 2001) is in Appendix B.

As can be seen in the task force report, a number of short-term goals were developed, and specific recommendations were made to the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in order to meet those goals. Specific actions taken, and accomplishments, during the 2001-02 and 2002-03 academic years included the following:

a) An Outcomes Assessment Advisory Committee (OAAC) was formed. This permanent committee consists of faculty representatives from all schools and colleges,
and the library, as well as representatives from the Office of Institutional Research, the Faculty Assembly, and the Office of Academic Technology and Extended Learning. During the first year (2001-02 academic year), the OAAC generally met two times per month; in subsequent years, it has generally met once per month. Also during the first two years (academic years 2001-02 and 2002-03), the faculty members on the committee received small stipends. This unusual arrangement—stipends are rarely given to faculty members for committee work—was supported by the CU-Denver administration because of the serious and time-consuming nature of this committee’s responsibilities.

The OAAC continues to meet monthly, and the faculty representatives serve as liaisons between the committee and the specific set of programs that each member represents. Two important guiding principles for the OAAC are that faculty members own and drive the outcomes assessments for the students in their programs, and that “one size does not fit all” when it comes to assessment plans (including designs and instrumentation). A significant portion of meeting time has been spent on sharing examples of assessment plans, discussing ways to increase faculty “buy-in” and participation, and exploring ways to use assessment data productively (e.g., “close the feedback loop”). The committee is chaired by the Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for Faculty Affairs. The minutes from OAAC meetings (November 2001 through December 2003) are in Appendix C.

The OAAC has developed a campus policy statement for outcomes assessment, as well as templates for programs to use in developing assessment plans and for reporting assessment results. These will be described in more detail in the next major section of this report, “Response to Specific Commission Recommendations.”

b) During the spring 2002 semester, the Office of Teaching Effectiveness sponsored a one-day conference on assessment; the workshop presenters were three faculty members from Alverno College, one of the leading institutions in the area of student assessment. (See the Nutshell Notes announcement about this workshop in Appendix D.) Participants received a copy of Loacker’s book, *Self-Assessment at Alverno College*. The workshop was very successful: approximately 50 CU-Denver faculty members attended (as well as some faculty members from the Air Force Academy), and the evaluations indicated high levels of satisfaction and perceived effectiveness.

c) During the summer of 2002, the Director of the Office of Teaching Effectiveness departed CU-Denver. This created an opportunity for administrators and faculty to study various options for faculty development services and activities on our campus. A new structure was created: The Center for Faculty Development (CFD). During the 2002-03 academic year, the CFD was directed by the Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. Five senior faculty members served as Faculty Fellows in the CFD, with each Fellow responsible for a different area: Teaching, Research, Technology, “Career Development,” and Outcomes Assessment. The Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment, who is currently the Interim Associate Vice
Chancellor for Faculty Affairs, worked with the OAAC to coordinate efforts across campus for the development of outcomes assessment plans by all academic programs.

d) By summer 2003, new or revised assessment plans had been developed by over 80% of the 108 academic programs (and the library). The faculty in the remaining programs worked on their plans during the fall 2003 semester, with the assistance of the OAAC members and the Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment. The plans are being implemented during the 2003-04 academic year, and preliminary results were submitted in February 2004. Examples of program-level assessment plans are in Appendix E, and examples of recently-submitted assessment results are in Appendix F.

Response to Specific Commission Recommendations

On p. 35 of the 2001 site visit report, four specific recommendations were offered in order to strengthen CU-Denver’s program of outcomes assessment. Each is repeated, below, along with a description of the progress made since 2001:

- A statement of University policies and procedures for the improvement of the educational experience through a coherent program of assessment of student learning.

  The CU-Denver “Policy and Procedures for Outcomes Assessment” is in Appendix G. This document was drafted by the OAAC during the fall 2002 semester, reviewed by Deans and Associate Deans, and approved by the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in early 2003. This document asserts that “assessment of student learning outcomes is a sustainable part of the CU-Denver culture that continually informs academic decision-making and program design and improvement.” It defines the term “program,” and states the requirement that all programs will conduct student learning assessment in order to continually inform academic programs and improve student learning. It describes the coordinating and facilitating roles of the OAAC and its chair, and it provides a timeline for assessment activities and submission of reports.

- A plan to support faculty involvement, development, and investigation of best practices in assessment.

  The Outcomes Assessment Task Force (spring/summer 2001) began the development of a plan to support faculty development and involvement in outcomes assessment; many of the elements are included in their August 2001 report (Appendix B). As part of the learning process, all members of the task force attended the June 2001 AAHE Assessment Conference. They returned with lots of ideas and examples and shared them at task force meetings and with their own faculty colleagues.

  The Office of Academic Affairs began to develop a clearinghouse of information about assessment during the 2001-02 academic year. These materials (books, pamphlets, information from web sites and conferences, etc.) have a permanent home in the Center for Faculty Development (CFD).
The Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment (who also is a member of the OAAC) offers assistance to individuals or groups on all aspects of the assessment process—from the development of the assessment plans through ways to “close the feedback loop” and use the assessment data for curricular improvements. The current Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment is a measurement/assessment specialist in the School of Education. He has presented information on a variety of assessment topics (e.g., specification of learning objectives, development of scoring rubrics) to the OAAC, a subgroup of Associate Deans, department chairs, and groups of faculty members in several of the schools and colleges. By incorporating outcomes assessment into the new CFD, support and assistance for faculty in the area of assessment will continue to be available.

- A plan to involve faculty in the development of a vision and standards for a coherent assessment plan across undergraduate and graduate units.

The OAAC serves as the faculty steering committee for assessment across all graduate and undergraduate units. The members of this committee developed the policy statement (Appendix G) and serve as liaisons with the faculty members in the programs they represent. (Each member represents approximately 8-12 specific programs.) Since the OAAC is now a permanent committee at UCD, discussions about standards and procedures will continue indefinitely.

Currently, the OAAC—under the guidance of the Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment—is developing procedures for a systematic review of the assessment plans and reports. Feedback will be provided to the program-level faculty groups on various features of the plans and results reports, including: the clarity and sufficiency of the student learning outcomes; the quality and quantity of the assessments; the clarity and usability of the rubrics (scoring criteria); and the adequacy of the plans for using the assessment data for curricular improvement and “closing the feedback loop.”

- A standardized format or template for organizing and presenting assessment data and patterns for growth.

Several templates have been developed by the OAAC, under the guidance of its chair and the Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment. These forms are in Appendix H. Included in Appendix H are the following forms and documents: a) “Template for Program-Level Annual Assessment Plans,” b) “Ten Guiding Questions for the Annual Program Assessment Report,” which gives faculty members assistance with the preparation of their assessment reports; c) “Instructions for Completing Annual Program Assessment Reports,” which includes a template for the reports; and d) a sample of a results “matrix.”

Following the initial use of the planning template, the OOAC discussed the form and made a few recommendations for improvement; this form will be revised before the programs use it to plan assessments for the 2004-05 academic year. The new results forms are currently being used for the first time. Some of the topics that the OAAC will
discuss during the spring 2004 semester are a system for aggregating assessment data across programs, and ways to display growth.

As a campus, we have had some experiences with electronic portfolios, due to the availability of grant funds during the 2001-02 and 2002-03 academic years. The technology experts in the Technology and Learning Lab (now part of the Office of Academic Technology and Extended Learning) assisted faculty groups in the School of Education, College of Arts and Media, and Graduate School of Public Affairs with the development of student electronic portfolios. Although these efforts showed some promise as ways to collect and aggregate assessment data, progress has been slowed due to the completion of the grants as well as fiscal constraints that resulted from budget cuts in the 2002-03 and 2003-04 fiscal years.

Additional Assessment Activities: Data Collected by the Office of Institutional Research

Concerted efforts have been taken to incorporate the work of the CU-Denver Office of Institutional Research, Planning & Analysis (OIRPA) into the outcomes assessment activities at the program level, and to disseminate the data that OIRPA collects to relevant individuals and groups on campus. OIRPA conducts or participates in a number of surveys that provide data related to student outcomes assessment. These include the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), the Alumni Employment Survey, the Alumni Survey, and the Student Profile Survey. The NSSE (which CU-Denver participates in on a three-year cycle, beginning in 2001) asks a number of outcomes-related questions of freshmen and seniors, including: students’ overall satisfaction with CU-Denver; their evaluation of CU-Denver’s educational contributions to skills such as acquiring the ability to think critically; the degree to which they were engaged academically (e.g., how often they asked questions or engaged in discussions in class); and their evaluation of faculty and course contributions to their development. The NSSE is particularly useful because it affords comparisons between CU-Denver and all participating universities (as well as urban peers). The NSSE results are communicated to administrators in the schools and colleges and posted on the OIRPS website. The FSSE is a national survey designed to measure faculty perceptions of student engagement and includes questions similar to the NSSE. CU-Denver is participating in the FSSE for the first time this spring.

OIRPA also conducts several surveys internal to the CU-Denver community: the Alumni Employment Survey, the Alumni Survey, and the Student Profile Survey. The Alumni Employment Survey is conducted every other year and includes questions related to CU-Denver’s educational contributions to employment of alumni. The results of this survey are shared with the CU-Denver Career Center and results specific to individual academic programs are sent to the programs and then incorporated into the Program Reviews. In alternating years, OIRPA administers the Alumni Survey and the Student Profile Survey. The Alumni Survey solicits, via a number of questions, views of alumni regarding the quality of their educational experiences at CU-Denver. These include items about the extent to which their experiences enhanced their ability to work collaboratively, understand written and graphical information, and experiment with new ideas and
approaches. Respondents also provide feedback on their interactions with faculty, and rate the usefulness of their education in furthering their careers. Finally, the Student Profile Survey asks current students about their educational experiences at CU-Denver—including questions about whether they are challenged in their coursework to use writing skills and critical thinking, whether they are satisfied with course quality, and whether they find the faculty to be knowledgeable and accessible. Results from both the Alumni Survey and the Student Profile Survey are shared with programs in the schools and colleges, are incorporated into the Program Reviews, and are posted on the OIRPA website.

As requested, OIRPA provides additional information to programs and to schools and colleges. These data include enrollment trend data, degrees awarded, demographic information about students, and so on. These data are also incorporated into the Program Reviews.

Ongoing Activities and Future Plans

- Under the leadership of the Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for Faculty Affairs, the Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment and the OAAC continue to meet regularly. As stated earlier, they are currently devising plans for ways to provide systematic evaluation and feedback on the assessment plans and results reports submitted by programs, and on ways to help faculty use assessment data effectively to improve academic programs and enhance student learning. The Faculty Fellow conducts workshops and meets with academic leaders and program-level groups of faculty members on various aspects of the assessment process.

- Discussions about outcomes assessment occur regularly at the Deans’ and Associate Deans’ meetings. The members of these groups are given progress reports on the programs in their units—in terms of submissions of assessment plans and assessment results reports—and discussions ensue about ways to further motivate faculty to participate in assessment activities. The Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment also makes presentations to these groups.

- The Core Curriculum Oversight Committee (CCOC) is currently engaged in reviewing the existing Core Curriculum and developing recommendations for changes to Core requirements. A key aspect of this work will consist of reviewing existing outcomes assessment procedures and developing new assessment measures. Evaluating the extent to which undergraduate students achieve critical learning goals during the Core courses will be a major focus of the revised Core Curriculum.

- Some of the schools and colleges are currently engaged in curriculum review and revisions that will include special attention to outcomes assessment. For example, a committee has been formed in the College of Architecture and Planning to study its curriculum and develop recommendations for changes. Specification of expected student learning outcomes and ways to assess them will be an integral part of this curriculum reform effort.

- Some of the schools and colleges are involved in self-studies for upcoming specialized accreditation visits, and outcomes assessments are critical components of the self-studies. For example, the School of Education is preparing for a visit by the National
Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). For all programs in the School, performance-based outcomes assessments have been designed and implemented. Descriptions of expected student learning outcomes and performance assessments are embedded in all features of the School’s programs, including program catalogues, graduation requirements, course syllabi and assignments, and so on.

- The schedule for CU-Denver Program Reviews is being revised so that the reviews coincide with specialized accreditation reviews (for those programs with external accrediting agencies). Also, more attention will be given to incorporating results of student learning outcomes assessments into the self-studies for the Program Reviews.
- Assessment plans will be developed for the non-academic units on campus—for example, Student Services—in the near future.
- Working with the Deans and Associate Deans, we are developing ways to ensure that students are aware of expected program outcomes in all of our programs.
- The organization and structure of the Graduate School is currently being studied—under the leadership of the Interim Graduate School Dean and with assistance from the Graduate Council. This group will discuss and propose ways to better coordinate the assessment of learning outcomes in the graduate programs on campus.
- The director and staff in the Office of Academic Technology and Extended Learning are developing procedures for the assessment of learning outcomes in online courses.
- The Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, and the Deans, are working on systems to better reward and sanction faculty members for participating in expected activities, such as outcomes assessment. It is likely that faculty participation in outcomes assessment activities will be a regular component of faculty evaluation systems in the future.

Conclusions

CU-Denver has demonstrated a strong commitment to student learning outcomes assessment since the 2001 visit and report by the Commission. An Outcomes Assessment Task Force was created in 2001 to recommend ways to improve and coordinate assessment efforts on campus. The task force report led to the establishment of the permanent Outcomes Assessment Advisory Committee (OAAC). The administration supported the task force by sending members to the 2001 AAHE Assessment Conference, and supported the OAAC by providing stipends to committee members during the 2001-02 and 2002-03 academic years. Further administrative support is seen in the creation of a part-time position, the Faculty Fellow for Outcomes Assessment, and incorporating this position into the new Center for Faculty Development (CFD). The CFD is managed by the Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for Faculty Affairs who is, therefore, responsible for oversight of CU-Denver’s academic assessment program.

Despite severe financial constraints (due to the budget cuts that CU-Denver has experienced during the past two years), the institution has actively worked to encourage and support the faculty in the development and implementation of assessment plans and in the productive use of assessment data. Essentially, over 100 programs at CU-Denver
are required to identify their student learning outcomes, draw on a variety of assessments to measure student learning for each of these outcomes, and use the information gained from these assessment in a feedback loop to inform program quality. In terms of levels of assessment implementation, we believe that we are currently operating within Level Two and rapidly approaching Level Three. Outcomes assessment has increasingly become an institutional priority at CU-Denver, as evidenced by financial support, the creation of the OAAC and the Faculty Fellow position, and greater faculty “buy-in” than we had three years ago. Acceptable assessment plans, including the specification of measurable learning outcomes, have been developed by almost all programs. The OAAC members help educate their faculty about various approaches to assessment and ways in which assessment data can be used to guide curricular improvements. Beginning with the 2003-04 academic year, all programs are required to update their assessment plans on an annual basis and submit annual reports of results; the results reports include descriptions of ways in which the assessment data will be used to guide curricular or instructional changes. In sum, assessment is increasingly becoming an integral part of all aspects of academic life at CU-Denver.
Appendix A:

Minutes, Outcomes Assessment Task Force Meetings, 2001
Appendix B:

Report of the 2001 Outcomes Assessment Task Force
Appendix C:
Minutes from OAAC Meetings, November 2001 – December 2003
Appendix D:

*Nutshell Notes* (Nov. 2001): Announcement of Assessment Workshop
Appendix E:

Examples of Program-level Assessment Plans
Appendix F:

Examples of Program-level Assessment Results
Appendix G:
Policy and Procedures for Outcomes Assessment
Appendix H:

Templates and Forms for Assessment Plans and Results