Assessment Thoughts and Summary of Findings from UAC’s 2016-17 reviews

Members of the University Assessment Committee (UAC) interrupted their normal review cycle last year to accomplish two purposes:

1. Conduct an overview of the last three years of assessment activity at UND for use in the assurance report being prepared for the HLC (UND’s institutional accreditor) and due to be submitted this winter. The HLC sees assessment as an absolutely essential component of taking responsibility for student learning – i.e.,
   a. we need to know what students who enroll in our programs should learn as a result of those programs,
   b. we need to know what they are learning well and where they are struggling,
   c. we need to be able to show that we know these things based on systematic examination, and
   d. we need to be able to demonstrate efforts to help students improve learning in areas where they’re struggling.

2. It’s now been 10 years since regular review of assessment reports (followed by feedback to the programs reviewed) began at UND. During those years, the UAC’s review practices have stayed largely the same. Committee members agreed that it was time to get a clearer sense of how much progress is really occurring on assessment if examined longitudinally. That perspective on UND’s assessment progress is especially useful for understanding progress in departments where assessment has been variable, e.g., little assessment activity is reported during one or more years. Is that “bad year” an indicator of an assessment problem? Or is it the result of focusing faculty attention on major curriculum revisions, with a focus on assessment of the new curriculum in subsequent years?

3. At the same time, that longitudinal review would allow us to see what might be falling through the cracks in terms of the committee’s own processes, perhaps enabling revisions to our forms or feedback processes that would enable us to better support faculty in their assessment work.

Notes on the findings – and advice for assessment reporting – based on that review:

- Assessment plans should be updated or reviewed and reapproved on a regular basis (perhaps a four-year cycle of reviews/updates?). When a plan is reapproved, a new date should be added to indicate that the review occurred, even if no changes are made. A copy of the plan with the new date should be sent to UND’s assessment director for posting.
- Both undergraduate and graduate programs should have assessment plans. (Certificates should too!)
- Many departments have multiple majors or degree programs. Each degree program should have its own plan (e.g., if a student gains exactly the same competencies with a BA and a BS degree, why would both be offered?) – although the distinctions are likely to be minor. When a
department has multiple programs, the report should clearly show which program (or programs?) is being addressed when describing methods, results, or loop-closing.

- **Assessment reports should include examples of raw data** so UAC members or HLC peer reviewers can understand how the assessment was conducted. (It’s hard to know what “students showed an increase in their understanding of X” really means: was there an increase based on a specific and systematic measure? did the report writer simply perceive an increase based on “feeling comfortable” with student work? was there a substantial increase, suggesting that something in the program has changed, or was it the kind of increase that’s more likely to indicate normal yearly variation?) On the other hand, UAC readers don’t need to see multiple pages of departmental spreadsheets! Clarity for an outside reader (whether someone from the UAC or an HLC peer reviewer) is what’s critical.

- Given that you can’t say everything in your report, it would be helpful if you could focus on showing the alignment of your assessment activities. Here’s an example of what that might look like:
  
  - “We focused on goal X during 2016-17.
  - The methods we used to collect data regarding goal X were analysis of projects completed by graduating seniors in a capstone class and exit survey results.
  - What we found from the capstone project analysis is [provide data examples here]. Exit survey results confirm capstone project results for goal X, e.g. [provide example]. Overall, the results indicated that students are doing better on this goal than when we last assessed learning around this goal. However, we do still have questions about whether these are the best measures of goal X.
  - Given that, we aren’t making changes to goal X or the curriculum at the moment, but we do intend to reconsider how we’re measuring it and determine whether these methods are the ones we want to stay with.”

In this example, the goal, method, results and analysis, and potential loop-closing are all tied together, i.e., aligned. This is extremely helpful for a reader who is not in your department – we can see how you’re thinking!

- **Most faculty realize by now that grades are not useful for assessment of student learning purposes**, and the reason for that is reasonably straightforward.
  
  - Grades are designed to aggregate a single student’s performance on an assignment or during a semester for the purpose of communicating back to a student, i.e., “you are doing B level work on this paper (or in this class).” So for a Political Science final report, a single letter grade may summarize (aggregate) the student’s performance on assignment criteria such as finding and integrating sources as evidence, drawing informed conclusions, demonstrating conceptual understanding of course content, innovative analysis of a particular situation, and clarity and correctness of writing.
  - With assessment, the aim is to be able to find out how students across the program are doing on individual program-level goals like “thoughtful and innovative analysis.” So, for assessment, student achievement needs to be disaggregated by criteria, but then added up across multiple students – the opposite of what happens with grading.