Institutional Accreditation:  
Why It Matters, How We’re Doing, and What’s Next  
Joan Hawthorne and Helen Melland – November 2006

Colleges and universities across the United States are expected to maintain accreditation by one of the regional accrediting agencies sanctioned by Congress. In our geographic area, the accrediting agency for higher education is the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association (NCA) of Colleges and Schools.

**Why does this matter to us? As a major state university, why should we be subject to a “voluntary” accrediting association?**

The fact of the matter is that institutional accreditation is voluntary only in the loosest possible sense of that term. No institution is eligible for any federal dollars unless it’s accredited. That means no Pell grants or federally guaranteed loans for students (and hence, realistically, no students). It means faculty and researchers become ineligible for funding from federal agencies like NSF or NIH. It means federally-funded student support programs like Trio or McNair Scholars disappear. In short, no mainstream institution, including UND, can survive without institutional accreditation.

The HLC made its last comprehensive visit to UND in 2003-2004. But UND did not achieve full reaccreditation at that visit. In addition to requiring that UND schedule its next regular comprehensive visit (due in 2013-14), the HLC required UND to prepare for a “focused visit” in 2007-08. At that focused visit, we must show HLC team members the progress that we have made on assessment of student learning, an area singled out by the HLC as a significant weakness at the time of the last visit to UND.

**What exactly did the HLC say was wrong?**

UND needs to “provide evidence that UND is moving toward maturing levels of continuous improvement and that faculty, students, and administrators across the University are involved in the assessment process.”

More specifically, all programs should have
1. identified measurable learning goals;
2. established more than one direct measure of student learning as well as indirect measures;
3. reviewed outcomes of such measures;
4. taken actions indicated by the outcomes (e.g., changes to program requirements, courses, levels of expectations, etc.).

The institution should be able to
1. document its attention to the process;
2. cite examples of actions taken at the department, college, and institutional levels
   a. both in implementation of assessment of student academic achievement
   b. and in response to outcomes obtained from such assessment.
Please translate! What will the HLC be looking for when they return to UND in Spring 2008?

The following items will certainly be at the top of their list:

1. When HLC visitors drop by faculty meetings or chat with faculty in their offices, do those faculty understand what assessment of student learning is? Are they engaged in it, in their courses or through their departments?
2. Does every department have a plan for assessment of student learning? Are they working on those plans, or are they just paperwork (while the department continues with business as usual)?
3. Is UND actively engaged in assessment of general education? Are we looking at outcomes of general education courses, and outcomes of the program as a whole?
4. Are faculty and staff at UND using the data they collect to make changes with the goal of improved student learning outcomes? Have we developed a culture of assessment, so that discussion of a curricular change, for example, includes conversation about how we know, based on the evidence that’s been collected, the change is needed?

What should I be doing to prepare for this site visit? And how about our department?

Every department has moved forward to some extent. Assessment plans now exist for virtually every academic program at UND, including every undergraduate and graduate major as well as general education. But, because our progress in assessment was inadequate at the time of the last comprehensive visit, we need faculty to move quickly to make additional progress.

1. If you’re confused, frustrated, or thinking assessment is someone else’s concern, speak up and learn more about assessment Engage colleagues in your department in discussion of assessment. Invite someone from our HLC Steering Committee (for the upcoming site visit), someone from the University Assessment Committee, or Joan Hawthorne (Assistant Provost) to meet with your faculty. Hold a frank discussion about assessment of student learning – maybe you’ll move forward in your efforts as a result. At the very least, you’ll have increased faculty understanding of assessment – which is a good thing in itself.

2. Make sure that program assessment occurs in your department. There’s always a reason to put it off. You have faculty on leave or new faculty in their first year. You have a program review to prepare for. You have a particularly heavy load of grad students finishing this year. You’re down a faculty member from being fully staffed. These things may be true, but there will always be a reason to procrastinate (as we know full well from our experiences as students and as teachers). Once assessment becomes a habit, built into the business of teaching, it won’t feel like a major load. Until you make it routine, it’ll always feel like an unnecessary burden. Just do it.
3. There are opportunities to become involved with assessment across campus. Take advantage of them. Join the Assessment Committee or the Gen Ed Committee. Volunteer to be a scorer for an outcomes assessment of one of UND’s gen ed goals. Commit to spending a few hours on university assessment of student learning – they’re our students and we share that responsibility for being purposeful about observing their learning and being equally purposeful about looking for opportunities to improve that learning.

4. Become part of the culture of assessment. If you sit on a curriculum committee, ask about the data every time you see a proposal for change. If you’re a department chair, ask about the data when making departmental decisions about how faculty lines or new course development. You don’t need to use it like a club, but keep reminding people that there are ways to know more about the decisions we’re making.

Help UND be prepared for this next site visit. And remember that assessment is a huge piece of ongoing national discussions about higher education. If you’re informed and involved, you can influence the conversations on campus and nationally. Assessment is about good teaching. It’s also about good campus citizenship.

Where can I find out more information about assessment at UND?

Two UND websites are key resources. Both can be found by looking up the Assessment Committee on the A-Z index and then scrolling down the gray box on the left – check out the newsletter website (http://www.und.nodak.edu/dept/datacol/assessment/newsletter/index.htm) and the departmental assessment plan website (http://www.und.nodak.edu/dept/datacol/assessment/Plan/indexplan.htm).

Or make use of the many people at UND who have developed some expertise on assessment. Anyone on the HLC steering committee (see members below) would be happy to visit with you. Those serving on the Assessment Committee (see Assessment Committee website for a list of current members) are very familiar with program assessment at UND and could provide input or feedback if you’re working on assessment. Many faculty who’ve been successfully involved in assessment activities within their own departments would be happy to offer words of wisdom based on personal experience.

Who represents my college/unit on the Steering Committee for this HLC focused visit on assessment?

Steering committee members include:
   Helen Melland (Nursing and Co-Chair)
   Joan Hawthorne (Provost’s Office and Co-Chair)
   Kim Kenville (Odegard School)
   Duane Helleloid (Business and Public Administration)
Richard Schultz (Engineering and Mines)
Kirsten Dauphinais (Law)
Margaret Healy (Education and Human Development)
Robert Newman (Arts and Sciences)
Renee Mabey (Medicine)
Wayne Swisher (Grad School)
Lillian Elsinga (Student Services)
Jane Sims (Outreach Services)

Please contact any of these people with questions or requests for additional information.