

ATTENDING

to Student Learning

BY JUDITH S. EATON

In November 2005, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) invited its institutional members to submit applications for the newly established CHEA Award for Institutional Progress in Student Learning Outcomes. The award acknowledges outstanding institutional progress in developing and applying evidence of student learning outcomes as part of the ongoing evaluation and improvement of college and university programs.

In establishing this award, the CHEA board of directors recognized the importance of attention to student achievement, especially given the current intense focus on accountability. Predating the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, with its challenges to both higher education and accreditation, the award demonstrates that the academic and accreditation communities understand the public's interest in evidence of both institutional and student performance, as well as the growing significance of postsecondary education to social and economic success in our society. The award was an early affirmation of the importance of public accountability not just to Secretary Margaret Spellings but to members of Congress, which has focused on student achievement as a vital issue in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, underway since 2003.

The board also wanted to affirm the vital and valuable partnership between institutions and accrediting organizations in addressing student outcomes. The award underscores the crucial importance

Judith Eaton is president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, an organization of approximately 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities that provides national coordination of institutional and programmatic accreditation.

of locating leadership for student achievement within colleges and universities—in contrast to recent federal efforts to vest this responsibility in government. Finally, the board wanted to send a clear and powerful signal to students and society that student achievement is at the heart of the long-standing commitment to the quality of our programs, institutions, and accrediting organizations.

Since the award is given to campuses with exemplary practices in addressing student learning outcomes, we hope that the description of them that follows will be useful to other institutions as they develop and use evidence of student achievement to judge their own performance and improve their programs.

AWARD CRITERIA AND PROCESS

Applications for the CHEA award can be institution-wide or focused on a specific program or major. The applications are judged on four criteria that, we believe, are essential features of exemplary programs:

- Articulating and providing evidence of outcomes;
- Providing evidence of success with regard to outcomes;
- Informing the public about outcomes; and
- Using outcomes for institutional improvement.

In reviewing the entries, we emphasize the use of direct evidence of student achievement to judge performance and improve programs, while acknowledging that institutional resources and processes play a significant role as well. The evidence provided must be relevant to what is being claimed about student achievement; potentially verifiable through replication or third-party inspection; and representa-

tive or typical of performance by either the major, the program, or the institution. It may result from an examination of all student work or representative samples, and it generally includes faculty-designed comprehensive or capstone examinations and assignments, performance on external or licensure examinations, or portfolios of student work over time. Self-study reports and student-satisfaction surveys are not accepted as direct evidence of learning.

We also consider whether there is good use of current technology in the methods and tools employed to track outcomes, as well as the extent to which attention to outcomes is embedded in an institution's culture and faculty are significantly engaged in the effort. We scrutinize applications for institutional leaders' commitment to the importance of student achievement and whether the institution's approaches are replicable at other institutions.

Each application for the CHEA Award is reviewed by an award selection committee that includes faculty

and administrators, experts in assessment, and leaders in accreditation. During 2006-2008, 94 applications were submitted to the committee for review, and 12 awards were issued. The winners demonstrate what it takes to successfully develop and use evidence of student achievement both to judge and improve performance.

The award winners to date, eight public and four private institutions, are located in ten states and include two community colleges and a technical college, one baccalaureate institution, two master's institutions, and six doctoral-granting institutions. Seven schools provided institution-wide approaches to student learning outcomes, two did so at the department level, and one involved a school within a university. One addressed a general-education program and one focused on cross-disciplinary programs. Despite their variety, the awardees share some significant characteristics.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OUTSTANDING PROGRESS IN DOCUMENTING LEARNING

A strong faculty leadership role

Most prominent and promising among the shared attributes of the winners' attention to student achievement is the extent to which faculty are not only engaged in, but are the architects of, the various approaches to evaluating student learning. Successful applicants demonstrate a level of faculty activity that belies the conventional view of academics as unresponsive to calls for accountability and indifferent to student learning.

Faculty at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), for example, have developed six principles of undergraduate learning that permeate curricular and co-curricular experiences on that campus. The goal is to guarantee that every student has the opportunity to improve and achieve a high level of performance in core communication

and quantitative skills; critical thinking; the integration and application of knowledge; intellectual depth, breadth and adaptiveness; understanding society and culture; and values and ethics.

The principles have been implemented from the freshman through the senior year. Faculty who have integrated them into their courses have had to undergo a significant rethinking about their approaches to teaching and learning. Since not all principles are enacted in every course, faculty must be committed to the goals not just of "my course" but also of "our program." The principles have been applied in departments from nursing and education to dentistry and engineering by means of the curriculum, faculty-development programs, and principles-based co-curricular programming. Student electronic portfolios document and assess both improvement and achievement in the principles in relation to the major.

At Mesa Community College (among the Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona), faculty have defined student-learning outcomes in nine areas: arts and humanities, cultural diversity, information literacy, numeracy, oral communication, problem solving/critical thinking, scientific inquiry, written communication, and workplace skills. A key feature of these outcomes is the extent to which they

encompass both general intellectual and workplace skills.

Attention to general education

There is considerable attention on exemplary campuses to the core or generic educational needs of students, which go beyond traditional academic expectations such as analytic or quantitative reasoning capacity to include, for instance, an awareness of cultural context and the skills to become socially engaged citizens. The institutions document the degree to which students have developed that awareness and those skills through means that often include portfolios of student work, and they make their results public.

At James Madison University (JMU) in Virginia, the focus on general education is driven by a longstanding intra-institutional partnership between the Center for Assessment and Research Studies and the general-education program for evaluating the effectiveness of the latter. Explicitly stated learning outcomes are associated with each of the five main areas or clusters of the program and are assessed annually. Data-collection methods include a portfolio assessment of writing, competency testing for information literacy, and pre- and post-tests. Evidence that JMU students benefit from its general-

education program is available to the public on both JMU's and State Council of Higher Education for Virginia's websites. Regular monitoring of results has led to ongoing improvement in both assessment methods and courses and has informed modifications of the curriculum.

At Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma, student learning outcomes are tied to five general-education expectations explicitly described in the institutional mission statement. Graduates are expected to demonstrate that they are spiritually alive, intellectually alert, physically disciplined, socially adept, and professionally competent. A variety of means are used to document these outcomes, including a university-wide electronic portfolio system. Students are required to maintain portfolios in both general education and their major or program. Faculty evaluate the evidence contained in the portfolios to evaluate student success.

Hocking College, a two-year technical institution in Ohio, has put a strong emphasis on the development of general intellectual skills throughout the institution. Success skills are assessed and documented in student e-portfolios. Assessment results are posted on Hocking's assessment website (www.hocking.edu/assessment_center) and are linked to Ohio's gateway website (<http://regents.ohio.gov/StudentSuccess/>). Hocking College's model of integrated outcomes-based curriculum development, general-skills integration, and program and institutional assessment has received state and national attention.

Preference for institutionally based strategies and instruments

In contrast to relying primarily on either external or standardized approaches for evaluating student achievement, exemplary campuses exhibit confidence in strategies and instruments that are institutionally developed and implemented. The awardees' preference to "grow their own" strategies challenges the current view of some in federal and state government that institutions, left to their own devices, cannot be relied upon to effectively address or assess student learning. These examples indicate that there are paths to accountability that need not involve standardization.

At the same time, some awardees augment their institutional approaches with indirect evidence of student

achievement from, for example, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). These tools, tailored by institutions to meet their needs, can contextualize

judgments about student achievement. Some schools are also using the liberal-education outcomes of the Greater Expectations Program of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to inform their efforts. Other

ers rely on the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to provide aggregated direct evidence of student learning.

Bowling Green State University in Ohio has identified seven university-wide capacities that all undergraduate

CHEA AWARD RECIPIENTS 2006-2008

Institution	Scope of Award Activity	Description
Bowling Green State University (OH) (2007)	University-wide	Seven university-wide learning outcomes across majors: inquiry; creative problem-solving; values in decision-making, writing, presenting, participating, and leading
Community College of Baltimore County (MD) (2006)	College-wide	High Impact Course-Level Assessment Project: collection and use of course-level learning evidence
Hocking College (OH) (2008)	College-wide	Outcomes-based education model of curriculum development; program-level review of student academic achievement (success skills)
Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis (IN) (2006)	University-wide	Principles of Undergraduate Learning: learning opportunities in core communication and quantitative skills; critical thinking; integration and application of knowledge; intellectual breadth, depth, and adaptiveness; understanding society and culture; values and ethics
James Madison University (VA) (2006)	General Education Program	Evaluation of general education based on explicit learning outcomes for the five areas of the program
Kennesaw State College (GA) (2008)	University-wide	Assurance of Learning initiative: enhanced assessment of learning in general education and other disciplines
Mesa Community College (AZ) (2007)	Cross-disciplinary/structured course of study	Learning outcomes in nine areas: arts and humanities, cultural diversity, information literacy, numeracy, oral communication, problem solving/critical thinking, scientific inquiry, written communication, workplace skills
Oral Roberts University (OK) (2007)	University-wide	Electronic portfolio system documents the degree to which students are spiritually alive, intellectually alert, physically disciplined, socially adept, and professionally competent
Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (IN) (2007)	Institute-wide	Learning Outcomes Assessment Project: ten defined outcomes required of all students, including ethics, communication, problem-solving, interpreting data, experiment and design
Seton Hall University (NJ) (2008)	School of Business	Three-phase review: pre-assessment, sophomore and senior assessment, post-assessment
Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville (IL) (2006)	Department of Psychology	Senior capstone program: graduation requirement to demonstrate proficiency in the major and general education based on baccalaureate learning goals
University of Saint Mary (KS) (2007)	Department of Education	Focus on eight learning outcomes in the M.Ed. and M.A.T., including education theory, research, and measurement and evaluation

CHEA AWARD SELECTION COMMITTEE

Roger Benjamin, President and Chief Executive Officer, Council for Aid to Education

John Dill, Deputy Chancellor for Education and Professional Development, U.S. Department of Defense

Peter Ewell, Vice President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

Bret Eynon, Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs and Founding Director for the Center for Teaching and Learning, LaGuardia Community College

Debra Humphreys, Vice President, Communications and Public Affairs, Association of American Colleges and Universities

Laura Palmer Noone, President *Emerita*, University of Phoenix

Kathleen O'Brien, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Alverno College

Jerry Trapnell, Executive Vice President and Chief Accreditation Officer, The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International

Belle Wheelan, President, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

majors should develop in their students: inquiry, creative problem-solving, examining values in decision-making, writing, presenting, participating, and leading. Faculty in each academic unit determine what counts as success in these areas, using commonly adopted strategies—for example, electronic portfolios—to provide evidence of student achievement. Bowling Green also regularly reviews its graduation rate, participates in national studies such as the NSSE and CLA, and publicizes its results.

The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) in Maryland tracks student learning through its high-impact course-level assessment projects, in which hundreds of faculty members and thousands of students participate every semester. CCBC developed measurable student learning outcomes for every course offered, which are listed in the common course outline. Although they all follow the same five-stage process, faculty design the experimental, formative assessments both to meet the needs of their courses and to ensure that they are authentic and valid. The evidence collected is shared with internal and external constituents in a variety of ways, including through the Learning

Outcomes Assessment Advisory Board and the Learning Outcomes Assessment web page. The comprehensive assessment model at CCBC also includes work at the program and institutional levels (for the latter, CCBC uses the Community College Survey of Student Engagement).

Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Indiana has developed an institution-wide set of abilities that all students should develop by graduation in areas such as ethics, communication, problem-solving, interpreting data, experiment, and design. Evidence of these abilities is collected annually through portfolios. All student submissions to the portfolio system are reviewed by a trained team of faculty raters. In addition to this evidence, Rose-Hulman regularly reviews curricula; undertakes alumni satisfaction surveys; and uses information such as graduation, retention, and placement rates to determine its effectiveness.

Kennesaw State University (KSU) in Georgia established its ongoing Assurance of Learning (AOL) initiative in 2003 to assess both general-education and discipline-specific student learning. The initiative, which is coordinated by KSU's Center for Excellence in

Teaching and Learning, is strategically integrated with other university activities such as comprehensive program review; faculty development in the scholarship of teaching and learning; and the university's quality-enhancement plan, "Global Learning for Engaged Citizenship." Each degree program's AOL report, including its use of the results, is updated annually and published on the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning website (www.kennesaw.edu/cetl/aol). KSU supplements its direct assessment of learning with the NSSE, in order to track the level of student engagement.

Focus on department, programs, and schools

Several CHEA award winners focused on student-learning outcomes at the department, program, or school level. The Seton Hall University Stillman School of Business in New Jersey, for example, has developed an innovative undergraduate assessment process with three distinct elements: pre-assessment; sophomore and senior assessment panels, in which students make presentations before business professionals; and post-assessment.

This comprehensive process provides robust information on the degree to which program learning goals have been met. The process, in place since 2000, has also catalyzed significant curriculum improvements, which have in turn improved almost every aspect of business students' educational experiences at Stillman. The school publicly shares its assessment process and results with all stakeholders: student participants, faculty, administrators, external assessors, alumni, and peer institutions. It also assists other institutions in developing their own assurance-of-learning processes (see www.shu.edu/academics/business/undergraduate-assessment.cfm).

The Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) Department of Psychology senior capstone enables students to fulfill the university's requirement that they demonstrate both proficiency in the major and an academic breadth commensurate with SIUE's general-education expectations. Faculty-developed baccalaureate learning goals are the basis on which learning is assessed in multiple ways. The process includes a primary-trait analysis of research presentations at departmental paper or poster sessions, as well as other behavioral indicators such as student research presented at peer-reviewed professional conferences. This ongoing assessment program informs curricular changes, promotes program improvements, increases student learning, and improves the time-to-degree rates of psychology graduates. The department shares its format and results with constituents internal and external to the university.

At the University of Saint Mary in Kansas, faculty in the Department of Education's M.Ed. and M.A.T. programs have developed the eight learning outcomes

expected of graduates in areas such as education theory, research, and measurement and evaluation. A key feature of the department's work is the emphasis on the close alignment of learning goals with course outcomes, instruction, assignments, and an ongoing review of program effectiveness. Summary results are available on the two programs' websites at www.op.stmary.edu/edu/default.asp.

A valuable role for accreditation

Finally, accreditation has played a central and constructive role in encouraging and supporting institutional efforts to more fully address student achievement by holding institutions and programs accountable for developing evidence of student success. Accreditors work with institutions to focus and frame expectations about student learning by making it an essential element of the quality assurance and improvement aspects of its review. For example, Mesa Community Colleges used the opportunity of an upcoming HLC-NCA visit to survey faculty on how they use their assurance results. And in its application for the CHEA award, Rose-Hulman described the benefits of leveraging its ABET and HLC-NCA reviews to focus faculty attention on assessment.

Accreditation also provides a venue for sharing best practices. Oral Roberts has done so at meetings of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association (NCA), the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and the Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology, Inc. (ABET).

WHAT HAS THE CHEA AWARD TAUGHT US?

The CHEA awardees of the past three years confirm our belief that at least on some campuses, attention to student learning outcomes is thoughtful, robust, and creative. Faculty at these institutions are significantly engaged in the design and direction of assessment and in judging how their satisfactory learning outcomes are. These colleges and universities are adept at crafting and applying their own tools and strategies, which yield reliable evidence of student success. Both institutional and programmatic accreditation are playing a central role

in ensuring student achievement by requiring that institutions plan for and have processes in place to support and evaluate student success. And as we continue to give the award, we find that applications are becoming increasingly ambitious and sophisticated. The kinds of activities that are documented in the award applications show that the federal characterization of higher education and accreditation as uniformly indifferent to student learning, resistant to accountability, and uninterested in informing the public and students about results is simply not accurate.

That said, much work remains to be done. The 94 institutions that have been applicants for the CHEA award represent a very small proportion of the some 3,000 that might have done so. More eligible colleges and universities need to participate in order to demonstrate that higher education as a whole is committed to the improvement of and accountability for student learning.

Institutions can also benefit from participating in campus-wide, state and national discussions about student achievement, including the Voluntary System of Accountability, sponsored by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities [editor's note: see the interview of David Shu-

lenberger and George Mehaffy in this issue]; the Accountability Network of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities; and CHEA's work to make student achievement central to accreditation judgments about institutional and programmatic quality.

We also need further conversation about instruments to assess student learning such as the Council on Aid to Education's Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the Educational Testing Service's Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) and American College Testing's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP). Key questions to consider are whether the academy should continue to use institutionally based approaches to assessing student achievement; the future role of external instruments such as the CLA, the MAPP, and the CAAP; and how the academy should respond to pressures for comparability and for rankings.

But meanwhile, institutional efforts in student achievement are vital to building public confidence that higher education and accreditation are indeed responsive to the needs of student and society. It is our hope that the CHEA award makes a contribution to this confidence-building and advances creative efforts to address the all-important issue of student achievement. ☐

RESOURCES

- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2006). 2006 CHEA Award for Institutional Progress in Student Learning Outcomes. *The CHEA Chronicle*, Volume 7, Number 2, May 2006, Washington, D.C. Available at <http://www.chea.org/Research/index.asp#chronicle>.
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2007). 2007 CHEA Award for Institutional Progress in Student Learning Outcomes. *The CHEA Chronicle*, Volume 8, Number 1, January 2007, Washington, D.C. Available at <http://www.chea.org/Research/index.asp#chronicle>.
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2008). Special Update Issue: CHEA Announces Winners of its 2008 Award for Institutional Progress in Student Learning Outcomes. *The CHEA Chronicle*, Volume 9, Number 1, January 2008, Washington, D.C. Available at <http://www.chea.org/Research/index.asp#chronicle>.
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2003). *Statement of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions and Programs*. Washington, D.C. Available at <http://www.chea.org/pdf/StmntStudentLearningOutcomes9-03.pdf>.
- Ewell, Peter T. (2001) *Accreditation and Student Learning Outcomes: A Proposed Point of Departure*. Washington, D.C.: Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Available at http://www.chea.org/pdf/EwellSLO_Sept2001.pdf.



Higher Education Administration

- Master of Science in College Student Personnel
- Ph. D. in Higher Education Administration

Dr. Grady Bogue Ph.D. Program Coordinator Bogue@utk.edu
Dr. Norma Mertz, M.S. Program Coordinator nmertz@utk.edu

elps.utk.edu/higher_ed_admin