Overview

The University of Akron is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), and participated in its reaffirmation review including a multi-year self-study and a three-day site visit in spring 2013. Based on this review, HLC reaffirmed UA’s accreditation for ten years and required a focus visit in spring 2015 on the topics of governance and learning outcomes assessment.

Specifically, in the Comprehensive Evaluation Report dated 4/10/13, the HLC site visit team noted that “substantial progress has been made in responding to past reviews and concerns about shared governance. The university continues to make progress on governance and administrative structures and processes and consultation on academic matters” and “considers the response to previous challenges to be adequate and recommended that the institution continue to find ways to assure improvements in Assessment and Governance processes throughout the institution.” However, the team also reported that “There continues to be a need for attention to the role of shared governance groups in planning, particularly with respect to administrative and budget/fiscal operations” and “the institution is still not where it needs to be with respect to assessment in several areas of performance including student learning objectives.” The report outlined that “the student outcomes assessment is not evenly developed across the academic departments and especially in the area of general education.”

A focus visit in the spring of 2015 was recommended to evaluate “the relationships and roles of faculty in shared institutional governance” attributed to the uncertainty of the final outcome of the current faculty governance structure, and “to assess the nature of the relationship and roles of faculty in shared institutional governance.” In addition, the visit should assure that graduate and undergraduate academic majors and the general education program have assessment processes in place that include (a) the skills and concepts to be mastered, (b) the assessment methods employed, and (c) the analysis and use of results to improve academic programs.

We intend to submit our focus visit report in November 2014 in advance of the focus visit which is scheduled for February 16-17, 2015.

Committees & Timeline:
Governance – Faculty Senate Executive Committee, University Council Steering Committee, Rex Ramsier, Nancy Stokes, and Laurel Rooks
Assessment – Assessment Committee, Rex Ramsier, Nancy Stokes, and Laurel Rooks

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>September 1, 2014</td>
<td>Task Committees with writing assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 1, 2014</td>
<td>Drafts due</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 15, 2014</td>
<td>Comments due</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 1, 2014</td>
<td>Finalize and submit to HLC</td>
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Governance

The University Council (UC) is the body that deliberates and makes recommendations to the president and senior vice president, provost and chief operating officer on planning, policy, operations and other substantive matters in areas that relate to the well-being and common interest of the greater university community. The UC is distinct from the Faculty Senate, which only considers matters that are academic in nature. The University Council, comprised of itself, the Steering Committee and the nine standing committees, is the most significant development relevant to how shared governance and consultative decision-making has evolved on our campus since the 2008 HLC focus visit on the governance topic. The UC has been operational for 3 years and is the primary mechanism for expanding shared governance at the University.

The University Council Steering Committee experienced a leadership transition mid-year 2013-2014, however, it has worked hard to improve overall effectiveness including conducting an analysis of its performance. Responses indicated UC should focus to improve communications, and the effectiveness of the committees and of the council as a whole. It is noteworthy that the UC Budget and Finance committee played an important role in recommending a FY15 budget to the President that was subsequently formally adopted by the Board of Trustees.

In 2013, the UC proposed University Council By-laws for consideration by the Board of Trustees (BOT). The BOT deferred action pending an opportunity for the new president to provide input on the governance and structure for the University. President Scarborough took office in July, 2014, and is currently in the process of learning about how UA operates. We anticipate that the focus visit report which needs to be completed by November 2014 will include President Scarborough’s input on governance and structure for the University.

Assessment

The assessment of student learning outcomes is a weakness of many colleges and universities, including UA. Since the HLC report in April, 2013, we have made significant strides in the right direction, as summarized below:

Individuals leading learning outcomes assessment

Chand Midha: Vice Provost and Executive Dean College of Arts and Sciences Buchtel College of Arts and Science (BCAS)
Stephane Booth: Special Assistant to Office Academic Affairs
David Steer: Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

Steps taken to make learning outcomes assessment important to the academic community

2013: BCAS Assessment Committee formed October 2013 and Board of Trustees Committee presentation
Professional development website established
Professional development seminars conducted through Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL)

Committee members work directly with BCAS departments

Assessment plans reviewed and implemented for BCAS

2014:

BCAS Assessment committee resolves questions related to assessment data collection

University wide assessment committee formed

Council of Deans and Provost briefed on assessment plan development

Committee members work directly with departments outside of BCAS

Assessment plans reviewed and implemented University wide

Overarching timeline for implementing learning outcomes assessment as integrated with revision of general education reform

May 2014: Faculty Senate approves new General Education plan

September 2014: Disciplinary assessment reports due from departments; some units have already reported

September – December 2014: General Education assessment submission window: oral communication and mathematics

October 2014: Draft report to Office of Academic Affairs


January 2015+: Continue to implement and report on assessment plans and actions for all University programs.

Status of learning outcomes in the other colleges

Many of the programs in colleges other than BCAS are accredited by professional organizations. Most of these had assessment plans in place and readily available. Results and recommendations from the most recent reports will be incorporated into our HLC focus visit update. Many accrediting agencies do not accredit graduate programs. Faculty responsible for those programs developed assessment plans in spring 2014. Faculty will implement those plans starting in fall 2014.

Summary statement related to learning outcomes assessment

Pending timely receipt of assessment reports, the Assessment Committee does not anticipate difficulties responding to the HLC assessment concerns. Overall the majority of faculty members across the campus are engaged in assessment activities. Faculty members who have analyzed initial data are discovering curricular changes are sometimes warranted to improve student outcomes. Based on those initial data, the changes are anticipated to range in scope from minor adjustments that affect individual courses to major curricular modifications that impact entire programs.