

January 28, 2018

Dear Colleagues:

The purpose of this message is to share and respond to the University Assessment Committee's (UAC's) annual [*Report on the Status of Assessment & Quality of Educational Effectiveness at the University*](#). As a reminder, all academic programs and a growing number of administrative units submit annual reports to the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) and senior administrators regarding the assessment of student learning outcomes. The UAC is charged with aggregating and analyzing the data in these reports from across the University and offering recommendations based on their findings. Each year, a select number of programs also engage in an internal self-evaluation, and the results of this review are shared with the provost, respective college dean, and staff from the OIRA. The UAC presented their findings and recommendations to the senior leadership on November 30, 2017 and met again with me to finalize their report on January 12, 2018. This communication is intended to help "close the assessment loop" wherein feedback from the senior leadership about the report is provided to the University community. Further dialog about individual program and unit reports should also occur within the colleges, programs, or units, which will, in turn, inform efforts aimed at continuous quality improvement in all aspects of University operations.

Notable statistics from AY 2016-17 were that 100% of required programs completed reports and perhaps more importantly, 100% reported taking actions in response to their previous year's assessment data. Progress was also made on all of the recommendations from the 2015-16 UAC report. As noted in the [summary letter](#) from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' comprehensive accreditation review, "The University has also instituted a positive culture of assessment for improving student learning, and the interest of the campus community in participating in the assessment process and improving the UNE culture of assessment across the whole institution is noteworthy."

The UAC also observed and recommended the following:

1. The UNE upper administration can provide leadership and make the university-wide assessment process more transparent by communicating its response to this report to the university community. WCHP, in its college report, finds it "challenging to widely disseminate assessment outcomes and share results through both departmental curriculum and faculty meetings structures." Having UNE leadership communicate its response would "help faculty 'own' and be invested in the assessment process."

This communication directly addresses this recommendation. Having been involved with the institution's assessment efforts over the past two decades, I remain mindful that the sustainability of assessment activities across the University are contingent on their value to the individual program and units. In that context, I believe these activities warrant ongoing attention and support from deans, the provost, and president to integrate assessment into our daily work. In this context, there must be meaningful dialog and actions that explicitly demonstrate how these assessment activities inform decision-making at all levels of University operations.

2. Continue to grow the collection of alumni data. Data from recent and past graduates can provide insight into the value of former students' education, their gained skills, and their satisfaction of learning in their field of study and with UNE support services.

The collection of robust assessment data from and about alumni has been challenging with many programs and units reporting low response rates and challenges maintaining databases with current alumni email addresses and other contact information. If this has been your experience, I would like to remind you that the OIRA is a valuable resource to assist with the development and administration of your future tools to collect data on alumni. Programs that have partnered with OIRA have reported improvements with response rates and appreciation for assistance with the compilation and synthesis of data.

3. To further advance the university-wide assessment system, the UAC would like to see academic programs assess all of their learning outcomes within the full program review cycle. For programs without specialized accreditation, program reviews take place approximately once every seven years. For programs with specialized accreditation, they take place the year following their reaccreditation visit.

I concur with this recommendation. The annual reports submitted to the OIRA typically only capture a handful of the learning outcomes assessed by the department or unit. However, it is expected that all learning outcomes are assessed on some regular cycle. The program review is the logical vehicle for the comprehensive reporting of these collective outcomes. Interestingly, some programs have requested being reviewed on a 3-year cycle, and the OIRA has revised the program review calendar to accommodate this request.

4. Encourage those programs that have met or exceeded the goals or benchmarks of their SLOs to consider setting higher benchmarks for the upcoming year to challenge the program and create an opportunity for students' continued growth. The goal is to create a culture of assessment and improvement in which faculty can raise the bar for student learning without fear of facing punitive measures if the more rigorous outcomes are not met.

This recommendation has generated a great deal of discussion, including an ongoing need to clarify terminology. By definition, student learning outcomes (SLOs) are those outcomes that students achieve by the end of their program of study. Many, if not all, of the professional education programs must demonstrate that all of their graduates meet all of the learning outcomes that are linked to their respective standards for accreditation. If students do not achieve a given learning outcome, they typically have to repeat coursework or, if they are unable to ultimately demonstrate they have met the learning outcome, they are dismissed from the program.

With the above caveat, I fully support this recommendation, which is really intended to set high academic standards for all of our programs. Even the professional programs could set achievement standards higher than those established by their respective accreditation body expectations. I believe that continuous attention on increasing rigor will result in continuous

movement towards our collective goal of creating and maintaining programs of excellence across the University.

5. Facilitate communication and coordination of program assessment measures across the University, specifically in regard to the use of student surveys. Administering too many surveys can cause “survey fatigue” in respondents, which increases the risk that the data collected will not be reliable and/or valid.

I have heard first-hand the concerns about “survey fatigue” and the need to better coordinate data collection from current students. I have charged a small task force to assess the situation with the goal to better coordinate and perhaps consolidate the multiple surveys that are administered to current students. I hope to share an update on the task force findings and recommendations later this semester.

6. Continue to support faculty, administrators, and university committees and offices, such as UAC, CETL, and OIRA, and utilize assessment specialists and external consultants to provide necessary assistance in developing and strengthening the assessment process.

The Office of the Provost remains committed to supporting assessment at UNE. The UAC and the Center for the Enrichment of Teaching and Learning (CETL) are currently housed within the Office of the Provost with ongoing budgetary support. The CETL is currently undergoing a third-year review of its mission, goals, and future direction. The task force conducting this review will be submitting its recommendations to the provost and president in May 2018. Based on faculty input last year, the UAC and CETL sponsored its annual May workshop with assessment specialist Linda Suskie, which was attended by over 85 faculty, professional staff, and administrators. Please hold the date of May 21, 2018 on your calendars for this year’s university-wide workshop focused on student engagement with national expert Elizabeth Barkley.

7. Consider the resource request of eight programs and three student support units for technology or software solutions to collect, aggregate, analyze, and store assessment data. The UAC will forward the request to the Deans’ Council and information technology committees to take up the charge.

These items have been discussed at recent meetings of Dean’s Council and Academic Technology Advisory Committee (ATAC). I will ensure a coordinated response to these requests and provide an update later this semester.

In addition to the recommendations outlined above, the UAC has made a commitment to:

1. Support more university-wide, student-facing units, such as Athletics, Global Education, and Title IX and Green Dot Training, to define co-curricular learning outcomes and assess students’ attainment of established goals.

2. Continue to improve communication between the UAC and UNE senior leadership.

3. Add to the UAC web page assessment resources that include the steps in the assessment process, tips on writing SLOs, and examples of curriculum maps and direct and indirect measures.

In summary, the culture of assessment is vibrant at UNE with 100% participation from academic programs and a growing number of administrative units. I commend the UAC's work this year culminating in their annual report and presentation to the senior leadership. I also shared the UAC report with President Herbert and thought it important to share with you his response:

I knew that we had made tremendous progress in assessment of student learning, but I hadn't yet done a deep dive into our efforts until now. This report, and all of the work it describes, is very impressive. This is an area that can often be very contentious among faculty, with lots of talk and little progress. It's clear that our faculty have taken the task very seriously, rolled up their sleeves, and worked hard in a coordinated way.

I look forward to working with members of the UAC as we continue to strive towards excellence in all that we do. I will close by inviting you to visit the websites of the [UAC](#), [CETL](#), and [OIRA](#) if you have not done so. Each site contains valuable resources and contact information and serves as a reminder that we have excellent support for our ongoing work with assessment.

Regards,

Michael R. Sheldon, PT, PhD
Interim Provost