

# On Research and Leadership UPDATE

Vol. 16, No. 2

Spring 2005

## Academic Assessment: An Interview with Peter Ewell

by Catherine Kirby

Dr. Peter Ewell is known for the rigor of his scholarship and his effectiveness as a practitioner and consultant in the field of assessment in higher education. In addition, he is an editor and regular contributor to *Assessment Update*, a bimonthly newsletter published by Jossey-Bass. Early in March, Catherine Kirby, Information Specialist in the Office of Community College Research and Leadership had the pleasure of interviewing him for this edition.

**UPDATE:** Colleges are at different points in their experience with academic assessment, and community college faculty and administrators are at different points along the continuum of knowledge of academic assessment. To provide an overview of the assessment movement for our diverse audience, could you briefly summarize the iterations the movement has gone through from its contemporary inception in the mid-1980s until now?

**Dr. Ewell:** A few years ago I wrote a chapter on the history of assessment for a book about accountability edited by Joe Burke of the Rockefeller Institute for Government. In it, I divided the assessment movement into two phases, which I termed, “Round One” and “Round Two.” Round One began in the wake of some prominent reform reports on undergraduate education that were issued in the mid-80s, as a result of which a number of states enacted Assessment Mandates. Typical Mandates required all public institutions in the state to implement locally-designed assessment programs and report what they found annually or biennially. Community colleges had to do this very quickly, but for the most part responded well. State level interest in assessment in this form lasted for about five or six years. Around the early 1990s, states began running out of money and devoted their attention to more pressing matters of finance and efficiency. About that time, in what I called Round Two, the accreditation community started to get involved in assessment. The feds were putting pressure on accreditors to give greater emphasis to the assessment of student learning in their standards. That immediately provided a second impetus to assessment that has continued ever since.

Those same periods—1985 to about 1992-93 and 1993 until now—can also be distinguished in terms of assessment methods. The early period of assessment largely depended upon surveys and easily available, off-the-shelf kinds of tests. Many community colleges, for instance, concentrated on evaluating the effectiveness of their remediation programs by re-administering placement tests. It was also popular to use tests like the ACT CAAP examination in community college settings, and this approach remains popular for some. But Round Two also saw the development of more authentic kinds of approaches, where the focus is on actual student work. This required faculty to develop scoring guides or

### *Editor's Note:*

*This issue of UPDATE focuses on Academic Assessment. The four articles represent diverse perspectives on this important topic. Because of their potential value to inspire dialogue both within and across departments, we encourage you to share the articles in this issue with faculty.*

*This issue and back issues of UPDATE can be found on the web at:  
<http://occrl.ed.uiuc.edu>.*

### This issue features:

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | <b>Academic Assessment:<br/>An Interview with<br/>Peter Ewell</b>           |
| 8  | <b>The Dance of Assessment<br/>and Accreditation</b>                        |
| 13 | <b>Assessment at Harold<br/>Washington College</b>                          |
| 16 | <b>Implementing Academic<br/>Assessment: Parkland<br/>College's Journey</b> |
| 19 | <b>The Culture of<br/>Assessment</b>  |

rubrics to evaluate actual samples of student work in a more systematic way. During this period, the assessment process was seen less as an “add-on” to the curriculum and became more embedded in it. To say that Rounds One and Two are cleanly divided is probably an overstatement, but it’s a nice way of making the point that there has been progress. Your opening question about colleges being at different points in their experiences is a larger issue; there is an enormous variation across individual college experiences, and I think that’s important for people to know. There will almost always be somebody out there who is at your college’s current stage of development.

**UPDATE:** I want to talk about both the technique and philosophy of academic assessment. Would you describe the way you conceptualize the integration of assessing teaching effectiveness and the classroom assessment movement within the larger process of outcome assessment?

**Dr. Ewell:** You use two important phrases in that question—“teaching effectiveness” and “classroom assessment.” They need to first be distinguished, and I’ll talk about both. Community colleges, like any other institutions of higher education, have faculty evaluation processes that have probably been in place for a long time. A lot of these are based on end-of-course student questionnaires that gather students’ perceptions of their instructors’ teaching effectiveness. These were in place long before the assessment movement. They haven’t gone away because they aren’t used for overall curriculum evaluation and instead are used to help make individual decisions about particular faculty. The classroom assessment movement (that actually began in community colleges, by the way) was based on the work of Patricia Cross and Tom Angelo and immediately proved enormously productive and pervasive, especially in community colleges. Classroom assessment was not about evaluating teaching effectiveness so much as it was intended as a tool for faculty to roughly determine how much students were understanding what was going on in a given class session. That movement had a tremendous amount of general impact on the overall assessment movement because people could gather useful information in a manner that wasn’t threatening. Faculty could do it in the privacy of their own classrooms. They could see the complete feedback loop of getting information, making a change, seeing if it got better, and so on. Classroom assessment modeled the assessment process in a way that got a lot of faculty turned onto the idea that “this assessment stuff” could actually be beneficial and might be extended to a wider community! At Parkland College, for example, it was interesting to learn that people were beginning to combine their classroom assessments and talk to one another about what they found. So, the privacy issue was overcome by a curiosity issue. I tell that story to illustrate that that’s exactly how the larger assessment process ought to work, too.

The literal answer to your question about how to integrate them is that the two processes should be aligned with each other in just that way; learning goals for each class need to be translated to broader learning goals that cut across the whole course, and

these, in turn, need to be mapped into learning goals that the department (or the college as a whole) may have for all of its courses. The best assessment programs demonstrate this kind of seamless alignment, so that you can talk to two faculty members in quite different places and say, “What do you expect in a good piece of writing?” (for example) and get consistent answers. So, in terms of integration, you want to have faculty who are practicing the assessment principles in their own classrooms every day.

One of things that is particularly revealing of a good assessment program is when faculty design their own classroom tests to assign regular grades (that is, not as part of an assessment program), they think like assessors and build these tests in the same way that larger assessment programs are put together. Creating routine tests and assignments should be a conscious act with explicit goals for learning in mind. That’s the theory of how all these things ought to fit together. There are some institutions that do it well and others that are just beginning.

**UPDATE:** The dialogue about teaching and learning that resulted at Parkland took on a life of its own as more faculty became engaged and started caring about it. How can we inspire that level of dialogue about assessment in general?

**Dr. Ewell:** Dialogue must be done across classrooms—that’s the bridging part. And we know that faculty are hesitant at first. It’s a situation where if faculty can show what they have done in private, then begin to talk about it and reflect on it without having it become a high stakes exercise, we begin to get some familiarity and some collective ownership. The key word here is “collective.” Faculty need to hold themselves collectively responsible for certain learning outcomes. The classroom assessment model was the foot in the door that allowed faculty some space to be able to reflect about teaching and learning.

Another thing the classroom assessment story illustrates is that the best way to build faculty ownership is to demonstrate immediate utility. That goes for any kind of assessment. For example, many institutions that are facing accreditation have to build an elaborate exoskeleton, a structure, for assessment. That takes a long time. It’s certainly vital to do that, but what you need in between are several little projects that have a beginning, a middle, and an end—situations where some results are generated that faculty can immediately apply to fix something, whether it’s looking at the prerequisite sequences in the math program or why so many students are failing a particular course in Psychology. Small research projects like this get people used to the idea that data matters and that we can actually do something about any problems we uncover.

**UPDATE:** The growth of online education has changed the complexion of student-teacher interaction as well as prompted a rich discussion about student learning. What are the key issues to consider when assessing student learning outcomes in online or hybrid-delivered courses?

**Dr. Ewell:** Assessment will almost always come up automatically in those contexts because the innovation has to prove itself. Online and hybrid environments have prompted the use of assessment techniques where they might not otherwise have occurred in the traditional environment. I've been involved in a number of projects centered on technology-delivered instruction in both community colleges and in 4-year colleges. In virtually all of them, the assessment approach is basically an experimental design where one must ask, "Is this new approach to instructional delivery as good as or better than traditional one?" That has pressed assessment technique more generally at the institutions where these investigations took place. It has provided a spur for faculty to get familiar with assessment techniques that might not otherwise have occurred.

In terms of key issues, one of the things we're discovering is that learner style makes a lot of difference in these new environments. This means that it's usually a good idea to assess learning style when doing an assessment of online environment because you want to be able to break down results by people with different learning styles. The online environment is one where a lot of individual motivation is often necessary. Picture a learner sitting alone in front of a computer terminal; that's not always a very socially supportive environment. That person has to be self-motivated to get it done. Fortunately for community colleges, adult students tend to be that way. But unfortunately for community colleges, purely on-line approaches don't work nearly as well for younger students who are in academic difficulty or in developmental courses. We've had limited success in terms of online work for less motivated students because they tend to put off the work until a later point and get overwhelmed when they return to it. So the main, extra consideration is the learning style issue. Otherwise, approaches to assessment are the same in the two environments.

**UPDATE:** The assessment for accountability mentality is replete in the literature. Please describe how you see the NCLB legislation affecting academic assessment at postsecondary levels?

**Dr. Ewell:** I think it's had a big impact on external stakeholders' perceptions of what assessment is supposed to be about. Back to Rounds One and Two: we've been through this before. The initial flurry of state interest in assessment (back in the 1980s) was very much stimulated by the "Nation At Risk" report about the terrible state of K-12 education, which came out in 1983. We're going through the same cycle again. If you ask a state legislator what ought to be done at the postsecondary level, he or she might reply, "Well, if it is good for K-12, we ought to do it in postsecondary education as well." Clearly, this stance determines the terms of engagement with respect to where external stakeholders want to start the assessment conversation.

Those of us in higher education, particularly faculty, also tend to look at NCLB with a certain amount of skepticism—a great deal of skepticism in many cases. But NCLB is interesting because it holds up high standards, and that's a good thing. Achievable standards are something that we ought to be attempting to

emulate. But NCLB also has embedded in it a punishment for non-performance—the consequentiality part of it. Poor performance is always accompanied by getting dinged. And a lot of people only concentrate on the standardized testing part of NCLB. The way to get long lasting assessment going in an institution is to direct resources to fix the problems that assessment detects, not punish the people who have the problem. It is unfortunate that the incentive structures built into NCLB are precisely the ones that can get in the way of healthy assessment at the institutional level.

**UPDATE:** A large amount of literature on academic assessment is devoted to advancing the art of assessing general education. In your writing you state that the assessment of general education must be integrally linked to the major. Please elaborate.

**Dr. Ewell:** I guess that's kind of a funny statement to a community college audience because there aren't any majors in the common sense of the word. But there are vocational programs and there are areas of emphasis in the general education (gen ed) track. The larger implication of what I was saying there is that most students only come to know what many of the abilities fostered by general education are all about when they practice them in context. For example, critical thinking means something quite different if a student is taking a chemistry class or a literature class, or if the student is in an auto mechanics program. "Generic" abilities like these manifest themselves differently. Students in any context, and often particularly in a community college setting, have difficulty with general education because there is no clear response to their frequently-posed question, "Why do I have to take this course?" It's much better to have the general abilities that you're trying to foster through gen ed courses embedded in a context where they mean something to the student. What you really want a student to know and be able to do at the end of a college program have to be manifest not only in general terms but also in some very specific performance contexts. The two go hand in hand.

**UPDATE:** Career and technical education (CTE) faculty have an advantage with respect to outcome measures because of certification and board exams that require specific accountability measures as well as having input from active advisory committees. What could general education faculty learn from CTE faculty, and why doesn't this transfer of knowledge occur more frequently?

**Dr. Ewell:** My first response, semi-facetious but certainly real, is they can learn that it can be done. There is a track record of being able to do assessment that has already been established at every community college—usually in its vocational and technical programs. The response that the gen ed faculty usually give is, "Well, it's harder for us." In most cases, it is a bit easier in a profession or vocational setting to specify outcomes in competency terms: to say, for example, "you have to put this carburetor on right" or "you need to draw blood in this fashion" or whatever the specific competency is. It really is harder for faculty in, for example, literature, to be able to do that. The point

is that faculty can watch what the vocational people are doing and perhaps draw parallels to their own situations.

Career and vocational faculty construct assignments that essentially require a performance. In many cases, arts and sciences faculty do that too, but they don't think of what students do as a performance. But a piece of writing is in this sense a performance, and the question that should follow is, "How can we assess it as a performance?" An interesting example I always pull out when I'm at a campus and this vocational/general education split develops is to bring the fine arts faculty into the conversation: people who may teach dance, or performance, or theatre. What they look for really is performance, but quality rests on expert judgment. Arts and Sciences generally don't have formal "assessments" in place to determine quality, but they are very familiar with juried shows or auditions—that kind of thing. It usually doesn't take much to document the thinking of experts who made such determinations, and other Arts and Sciences faculty can pick up the technique. My own background is in political science so, using myself as an example, I would say, "What elements of an assignment could I construct as a performance (a role play in a scenario-based setting) where an issue comes up and the task is to write a policy brief for a policymaker about it?" That's an equivalent of the clinical settings that health professions faculty have to work with or the portfolio that an art student has to put together. It is down at the assignment level that faculty can learn how to do this.

Now, why doesn't this transfer of knowledge occur more frequently at community colleges? Well, first of all, faculty from these two areas don't talk to each other very often. I've seen some good attempts to remedy this situation through assessment fairs that allow sharing of best practices, or through assessment committees, where people drawn from different programs can get to know each other's practice. I think that both sides have something to learn from the other, and that's becoming recognized. Lurking underneath all of this, though, is a distinction between education and training which some people wrongly advance. This is usually couched as, "You're [CTE faculty] just doing training; we're [gen ed faculty] doing education." I believe that this is a false distinction and a misperception on the part of the gen ed faculty. But I think there are misperceptions that go the other way, too. For example, CTE faculty often discount the need to instill in students real depth of understanding in the practice disciplines, of knowing the "why" behind the "how."

**UPDATE: In constructing assessment with the general education curriculum, how does one go about defining concrete tasks or performance measures?**

**Dr. Ewell:** When approaching this topic I constantly want to return the attention of my colleagues in general education to their own assignments and to ask themselves, "What am I really asking students to do?" One exercise I love to undertake with faculty is to ask them to answer their own test questions. It's surprising how few have actually done so, and then asked themselves, "If I

think I provided a good answer, exactly what's good about it?" That's often the starting point for developing a good rubric.

**UPDATE: In career courses, technology or advances in practice often drive changes in not only content of what is taught but also the ways learning outcomes are measured. Is there a corollary in gen ed courses?**

**Dr. Ewell:** I think there is, and I think there has been a lot of progress here that can be attributed to both technology and research that ought to profoundly affect what's going on in assessing general education. First of all, there has been a real revolution in cognitive science and as a result, we know a lot more about the way people "make meaning" out of educational experiences. That's affecting the way curricula are designed to include much more collaboration and active learning, much more problem-based learning and service learning. All of those things are just as important in general education as they are in the practice disciplines. They certainly affect assessment in the sense that we now know much more deeply what we're looking for in terms of the meaning-making process, which leads to more authentic ways of thinking about creating scenario- or case study- based methods that can isolate the many misunderstandings that students may have in trying to grasp a concept in, say, physics or about another culture. There have also been advances in how to assess team-based projects. We would not have seen any of these a decade ago.

Technology has also changed the way assessment proceeds in some of the general education fields. For example, take the field of writing, where technology now is allowing much more reliable machine-graded answers—ETS now machine scores Graduate Record Examinations, for instance. Similarly, technology provides us much better ways to build online scenarios that can be used to assess critical thinking skills. So in general education, change is not so much about the historical content of key areas of knowledge or ability. It's a little bit different in vocational fields where you may have a completely different way of doing a particular job. The "job" doesn't change that much in general education, but we sure know a whole lot more about what works best in preparing people to do it.

**UPDATE: How do the course-taking habits of many community college students, especially those not enrolled in career programs, affect the ability to measure outcomes of general education?**

**Dr. Ewell:** You pose a very important and difficult question because a lot of community college students don't follow the curriculum we design. Instead, they tend to take courses in different orders; they violate prerequisite sequences. Such behaviors present an enormous challenge for assessment. In fact, many of them bring in coursework from other places. This affects the ability to measure outcomes because it is difficult or impossible to definitively establish what the baseline conditions of these students are. The best answer—and I can't emphasize this enough for community colleges audiences—is to

undertake sound longitudinal databases that are capable of tracking multiple student paths through the curriculum. These paths provide the “stimulus conditions” that must be associated with outcome measures to make sense of what’s happening. If a person performs a certain way on an outcome measure, we want to know what courses he or she has been exposed to, in what order, and under what kinds of conditions. That can have an enormous impact on our understanding of what’s really going on.

One great example is in remedial courses, particularly where the timing of the remediation may be crucial to actually being able to master the skills. I remember working with a consortium of community colleges in Texas a few years back and finding that if a student was enrolled in a remedial course in the Fall on an initial placement and entered a math course in the following Spring, the outcomes were much better than in the corresponding Spring-Fall sequence. If there is a whole summer between the basic skills course and the next application, the student tends to forget a lot of content. It’s tremendously important to have solid institutional research capabilities at the institution that can tie assessment results to coursetaking behavior and make sense of it.

**UPDATE: Can you describe some promising practices you’ve seen related to the assessment of general education?**

**Dr. Ewell:** The most promising are task-based, scenario-based kinds of assignments that are embedded right into general education courses. Once these assignments are created, they are not an individual faculty member’s “property.” Colleges using this approach have defined a couple of places in the curriculum where they can collectively develop assignments designed to do “double duty.” Faculty get to grade their own students for the record, but then they can rate, using collective rubrics and table readings, samples of these same assignments for more general purposes—for example, to assess critical thinking or problem solving ability. These practices are anchored seamlessly in the curriculum and students don’t know that they’re being “assessed,” so there’s no impact on performance and no need for special motivation or anything of that sort. A good example is at Johnson County Community College where key assignments are anchored to general education abilities, pulled on into a cross sectional portfolio, and looked at collectively by the faculty. Another best practice is use of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) that was modeled on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). CCSSE is only just getting started and had its first major administration a year and a half ago. But the survey shows all the same signs that the NSSE did of being able to generate a great deal of good faculty conversation about teaching and learning. Again, you need stimulus data as well as the outcomes data to move forward, and CCSSE is another way of collecting this kind of information.

**UPDATE: Based on your experience and perspective, describe the ideal makeup of an assessment committee?**

**Dr. Ewell:** Assessment committees tend to be of two kinds. They’re either governance committees so they’re built into the

academic senate or something like that, or they’re administrative committees that are advisory to the Cabinet or Chief Academic Officer. I don’t have a preference either way, but one thing I don’t think is terribly effective is rigidly following a kind of representation model which demands that we have “one of these” and “one of those”—all the kinds of things that typically arise when a governance committee gets involved. The best makeup for a committee, whatever its structure, is a collection of people who are respected by their colleagues. They tend to be faculty and staff who have been at the college a while and who can serve as ambassadors to go back to their own departments and units, let them know what’s going on, and build some enthusiasm for the process. A lot of places try to do it as though it were an exercise in pure organizational development instead of emphasizing people skills, and that is a mistake. You want the kinds of people who have enough enthusiasm to move the idea of assessment forward, together with a little bit of technical knowledge. It’s better to have some people on the committee who know something about statistics and a bit about some of the techniques you’ll be dealing with. It’s also good to have a couple of skeptics. Invite them in recognizing they are not completely on board and listen carefully to their input. It’s a tall order to get all those people but that’s the ideal. It’s also important to have a succession plan. One thing that happens a lot on assessment committees is that the stalwarts burn out. You have to have some way of being able to renew the committee’s membership so people are only there for four or five years at a time, and that they rotate on and off.

**UPDATE: Who should the assessment committee report to?**

**Dr. Ewell:** That’s a much-debated question, and I don’t think there is a single answer to it. It ought to, first of all, have as its principal administrative contact the person who is most responsible for the curriculum. That could be the Chief Academic Officer, or whatever title handles that function. Whether that person should actually be on the committee, or even chair it, is another much-debated question. But, the committee should have a clear reference to the academic affairs side of things. On the governance side, it should report to, or be closely linked with, the authority that approves courses and curriculum. Again, governance arrangements vary between colleges. There is an alternative architecture that seems to work just as well, where the assessment committee serves as the evaluation arm of the strategic planning committee. When the planning committee goes through its annual cycle, assessment is included and takes a look at the effectiveness of the things that were previously planned and implemented. There are a lot of ways to do it and I don’t think there is one magic bullet.

**UPDATE: How can colleges involve more faculty and build faculty enthusiasm for the assessment process?**

**Dr. Ewell:** Let me re-emphasize the fact that faculty get involved with assessment when they see it as a way to prove an answer to a problem that they actually have. And the problem that they typically have is not something like “the state legisla-

ture” or “The Higher Learning Commission.” The best approaches to building genuine faculty involvement are the ones that get into the curriculum by raising the question, “What’s a particular teaching/learning problem that faculty say they’ve got? And can we use assessment to build some lines of inquiry that will help them address this problem they think they have?” I’ve mentioned the topic of prerequisite sequences earlier, but I’ll do it again because I find it tremendously powerful in engaging faculty. This is because faculty don’t like re-teaching things they thought students were supposed to have learned in an earlier class. That’s a common problem. Instead of pointing fingers at other faculty and saying, “You didn’t do your job”, such situations should be treated as a collective problem for everybody to work on. Faculty can design a little study to find out exactly why this is happening, then follow up with specially-designed assignments in the earlier course that will test the skills necessary for the later course in the context that students will actually see them. Everyone wins!

Another thing that I wish more administrators understood (actually, I think they do instinctively, but it’s hard to act on) is the degree to which the ‘gotcha’ mentality is the first thing that faculty bring to assessment. The more administrators can reward departments for discovering and sharing a negative finding, and follow that with a plan for how to deal with it, the more they are going to build ownership of the process. What faculty are afraid of is that when a weakness is revealed, something bad is going to follow. If instead, administrators or the committee can, in the first stages of one of these investigations say, “Thank you for helping us learn that we have a problem,” and “We have to devote some resources to doing something about it,” they create a completely different tone. Language is a big problem too. At bottom, assessment is about inquiry, and faculty respond to the word “inquiry” the word “scholarship.” They don’t tend to respond as well to words like “standards” or “criteria.” The more assessment is seen as a process of scholarly inquiry, the better off you are.

**UPDATE:** How far are we from the day when, at most institutions, we can shift the focus of assessment efforts from development or process-related issues to using assessment for improvement?

**Dr. Ewell:** I think we’re already there in some places—or certainly very close. We’re going to constantly be in the tool development mode, which is a process related effort. The real progress is marked in moving from small scale to large scale. Accreditation has gotten us into this “process improvement” kind of language and that’s a good thing. It takes a long time to develop a full-blown assessment process and start using the results. I think it’s much more seamless than linear development. The best programs I know started with a few small things, built them up, and gradually spiraled into more utilization of results in a wider and wider arenas. One of the complicating factors is the need to report to external audiences, and that’s the accreditation conversation because they want to see assessment processes developing or in place. Processes are what

accreditors use to judge whether or not an assessment program is real, is implemented well, and so on. As long as accreditors are focused largely on process it’s hard for institutions to get beyond process. They’re moving through that phase though, and more and more you hear accreditation conversations focused on use of results. When I advise campuses about the assessment component of accreditation I’ll say, “Include some stories, as many as you can, as sidebars in your self study that can illustrate how you fixed something or you discovered a particular problem and did something about it.” That’s that cycle that accreditors always look for.

**UPDATE:** Can you describe what academic assessment looks like in a community college where assessment is seen as a natural part of program and institutional improvement and not seen as a requirement of external accrediting agencies?

**Dr. Ewell:** What you describe is an ideal condition. It exists where there are a few assessment processes (portfolio reviews, CCSSE, or others) that almost everybody on campus knows about. There don’t have to be many of them, but they have to be things that virtually every member of the committee knows exist and considers legitimate. Another earmark of campuses that have reached this level is when they have occasions or places when faculty can get together and talk about the results they are getting. An example is a community college in West Virginia that has an annual occasion called “Data Day,” where the faculty inservice day is dedicated to looking at assessment data—almost in a party atmosphere. Any of the data can be interpreted a lot of different ways, and faculty have to share those interpretations. The right effect can be achieved by almost any activity where a lot of people get together in small groups around a few key pieces of data that came from the assessment process, then talk about the results and what they are going to do as a result. If an administration is enlightened enough, they will follow up on those conversations with money to respond to the issues and questions that came up. That can build an enormous amount of enthusiasm for the process.

**UPDATE:** How can colleges begin to use the results of assessment for continuous improvement?

**Dr. Ewell:** The secret is to start small, start inside the curriculum, put money behind it, and benchmark performance. As we’re developing technologies like CCSSE, and increasing the use of ACT’s WorkKeys in community colleges, for example, it is important to benchmark performance externally. If faculty can find some publicly-reported information and then compare their own results to them, they can know where they stand and what to do. I know CCSSE going to try to do that in a much more systematic way. Through benchmarking, you can find somebody or someplace that is getting very good results in a particular area and, just as in continuous quality improvement in the corporate world, you can say, “Can we come visit you and see how you do it?” Jeff Seybert at Johnson County Community College is running a benchmarking project like that.

**UPDATE:** Given that we know that the “assessment as improvement” mentality already exists at some institutions, what must happen for it to occur on a more widespread basis?

**Dr. Ewell:** The leadership point is particularly important here. You have to have leadership that is ready to stick with this but keep their hands off of the details of it. They have to be visibly behind the process, reinforcing it, and sometimes even packaging their own decisions around assessment results even though their gut may have told them that this was the right decision in the first place. Closing the loop with action is the thing that gets people going; otherwise, people can become cynical.

**UPDATE:** Most, if not all, of our readers are familiar with your long history of academic work related to assessment. On what specific topics are you currently concentrating your efforts or are most excited about?

**Dr. Ewell:** I’m working in two very different directions that I’ll use as examples. One is “down and in.” We’re involved at NCHEMS in a couple of projects that are focused on blended forms of instruction using technology. We’re designing assessments to try to determine, for example, whether student use of a tablet PC to take notes changes the way they think, and therefore perform. This particular project is not at a community college but it easily could be implemented there. What we’re trying to do is create assignments in cooperation with faculty in a sufficiently standardized way that we can count on the results to be valid and reliable to know whether or not the innovation is making a difference. Other things that I’m involved with at the campus level build on that same approach. ◆

At the other end of the scale, I am involved with the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) that the Council on Aid for Education of the Rand Corporation is continuing to develop. This is an authentic, task-based, assessment that poses students with real world problem-solving situations and asks them to address them. Some community colleges in Missouri are administering that examination and using it to benchmark their performance against national standards. We recently participated in a national benchmarking project with that particular instrument, together with the Work Keys, as part of the Pew Forum on College Level Learning. About a dozen Illinois community colleges were a part of that. Some did quite well in recruiting students to participate and some didn’t do so well, but it was a great learning experience for everybody. And, I’m still involved in a lot of work with accreditation. For example, I’ve worked for a long period of time with the Western Association of Colleges and Schools in developing their new collaborative standards-based process that is a much healthier approach than the one it replaced. That gives a range of my current work; we’re always involved in something!

**UPDATE:** Is there anything else you’d like to add?

**Dr. Ewell:** I guess there are two things. The first is related to our earlier conversation about the unevenness of assessment’s development and implementation across campuses. We have colleges that have a good assessment program and then lose it with a change of leadership or some other change of circumstances. That situation emphasizes the culture question yet again. I will occasionally get a call from a place I visited 15 years ago and they don’t remember my visit and what might have been learned because many of the people have changed. It emphasizes the fact that assessment is not about processes and organizations—it’s about people. Bringing people on board and getting real ownership of the process is something you can never relax about; it’s something that constantly has to be worked on.

**UPDATE:** That’s even more important in light of the turnover in administration and faculty in community colleges.

**Dr. Ewell:** Yes, it’s much more turbulent in the community college world. The second thing I would be remiss if I didn’t say is that community colleges, despite all of the challenges they face and despite the unevenness in their levels of implementation, tend to be a whole lot better at assessment than are four-year counterparts. That’s not uniformly the case, but the fact is that community colleges’ main business is student learning, and there is usually a willingness to innovate. This means, in general, they are a healthier place for assessment than most other kinds of institutions. ◆

*Peter Ewell is Vice-President of the National Center of Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) in Boulder, CO. The Center is a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to assist colleges and universities as they improve their management capability. At NCHEMS, his work is devoted to creating longitudinal student databases and other academic management information tools. He has consulted with over 375 colleges and universities and twenty-four state systems of higher education on topics including assessment, program review, enrollment management, and student retention. In addition, Dr. Ewell has authored six books and numerous articles on the topic of improving undergraduate instruction through the assessment of student outcomes. He also serves as a principal partner in the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning. Prior to joining NCHEMS, Dr. Ewell was Coordinator for Long-Range Planning at Governors State University. A graduate of Haverford College, Dr. Ewell received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Yale University and was on the faculty of the University of Chicago. He can be reached at [peter@nchems.org](mailto:peter@nchems.org).*

*The interview was conducted by Catherine Kirby, Information Specialist at the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at UIUC. Ms. Kirby’s e-mail address is [c kirby@uiuc.edu](mailto:c kirby@uiuc.edu).*

# The Dance of Assessment and Accreditation

by Barbara D. Wright

The relationship between assessment and accreditation has been described as a dance. But, are we looking at the coordinated fancy footwork of Fred and Ginger, or another dance entirely - The Masochism Tango? Who leads, who has to do it all backward in high heels, and how has the act been received by its audiences? The following remarks examine five propositions regarding the assessment-accreditation relationship and raise questions about the direction in which the dance is taking us.

## I. "It Takes Two to Tango": The chief driver for assessment has turned out to be accreditation.

This observation may seem so obvious as to hardly warrant mention. Since the late 1980s, the inclusion of assessment of student learning in accreditors' standards has undoubtedly inspired more assessment plans than any other single factor in American higher education. But this level of influence was not at all apparent or anticipated when the movement to assess student learning first began to gain momentum in the mid-1980s. At the time, postsecondary educators were keenly aware of calls for reform of undergraduate education from *within* the academy (National Institute for Education's *Involvement in Learning*, 1984; Association of American College's *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, 1985). They shuddered at the increasingly insistent calls for accountability coming from *outside* the academy (e.g. the National Governors' Association's *Time for Results*, 1986; state mandates). The academy responded primarily in relation to these forces, and only secondarily to accreditation.

Prodded to require assessment by the federal government in 1983, accreditation slipped in under the radar and then discovered that assessment was actually a very good fit. Many of the traditional characteristics of accreditation turned out to be characteristics of good assessment practice, as well. Accrediting agencies, particularly the regionals, are respectful of the diversity among institutions, asking institutions to demonstrate effectiveness in relation to self-defined mission and goals. They have not prescribed specific approaches to assessment, either, granting institutions the flexibility to define their own paths. The slow but steady rhythm of accreditation – typically a cycle of fifth-year reports and decennial reaffirmation – is suited to the requirements for meaningful implementation of assessment, which must be viewed as a long-term, indeed never-ending process.

When criticism of higher education grew more strident in the late 1980s, the role of accreditation in ensuring quality was largely overlooked – to the chagrin of the associations, which responded by seizing the opportunity that assessment presented. Associations revised their standards to reflect the new expectation for assessment of student learning, and their workshops on

how to approach assessment and reaffirmation were among the most popular at annual American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) assessment conferences. Thus, directly or indirectly, accreditation has contributed enormously to the development of campus expertise. They are also led by example, moving from an overwhelming emphasis on *inputs* and processes to inclusion of learning *outcomes*. The timing was also fortuitous. Accrediting agencies were able to join their efforts with resources provided by AAHE and the American Association of Colleges and Universities. They were able to ride the wave of new pedagogies, new attention to learning styles and non-traditional students, new definitions of scholarship – indeed, the whole paradigm shift from teaching to learning and from teacher- to student-centeredness.

The result was a happy *pas de deux*: accrediting agencies used assessment and the new focus on student learning to reinvent themselves and reestablish their credibility, even as assessment used accreditation to establish itself as an essential element of campus practice. Because accreditation is something few campuses can ignore, money, staff, and serious attention were invested in assessment specifically in order to prepare for upcoming accreditation deadlines. Institutions' resistance to assessment was relatively muted, compared with the suspicion and resistance that had greeted demands for assessment from national and state government. A fundamental compatibility emerged: if they synchronized their "footwork," both assessment and accreditation could serve both internally, to improve student learning, and externally, for accountability.

The trick was – and remains – to get the balance right. The partnership has not been without problems. You start a list of problems it seems. If you say "One" could you continue with "Two" etc related to each problem you identify? One was the initial tendency of accreditors to ask for a plan – and for institutions to consider the job done for the next five years once they had complied. There has been a great deal of planning to plan and not nearly enough action over the past 15 years or so. Related to that delay are the 5- and 10-year cycles of assessment: an asset if there is steady progress between self-studies or reports, but a liability if time spent between cycles results in only episodic attention and the resultant loss of campus expertise. Campuses tended to want a recipe that would assure a good report, instead of developing an approach to assessment that would make sense for the campus. Weak visiting teams with little knowledge of assessment and low expectations sent mixed messages about its importance. On campus, administrators could use accreditation as a lever for getting assessment started, but they frequently also overused the external threat, creating an unproductive "us-against-them" dynamic and causing the campus to lose sight of the real reason to do assessment – and

ironically, the real reason accreditors want campuses to do assessment, too: because, as responsible educators, we all want to improve learning and demonstrate accountability.

The question arises: are assessment and accreditation still equal partners, or has assessment been overshadowed by accreditation? What *does* serve today as the chief motivation for assessment, beyond accreditation? Is assessment becoming increasingly defined by the standards of accreditors, for example, by the numerous process questions that characterize North Central's AQUIP project? Or by the focus on evidence and the many legal metaphors that characterize Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) literature? What are the implications of including student development along with more traditional academic learning goals, as Middle States does? Is assessment losing its intellectual center of gravity? Is Fred pushing Ginger around? Does it matter?

## **II. “Shall We Dance?” There is a yawning chasm between theory (accreditation standards) and practice (what happens on campus).**

Many of us have talked about the difference between the “paper curriculum” (what’s in the catalogue), the “taught curriculum” (what is offered), and the “learned curriculum” (what students actually take away from a course or program). There’s an analogy here to accreditation and assessment.

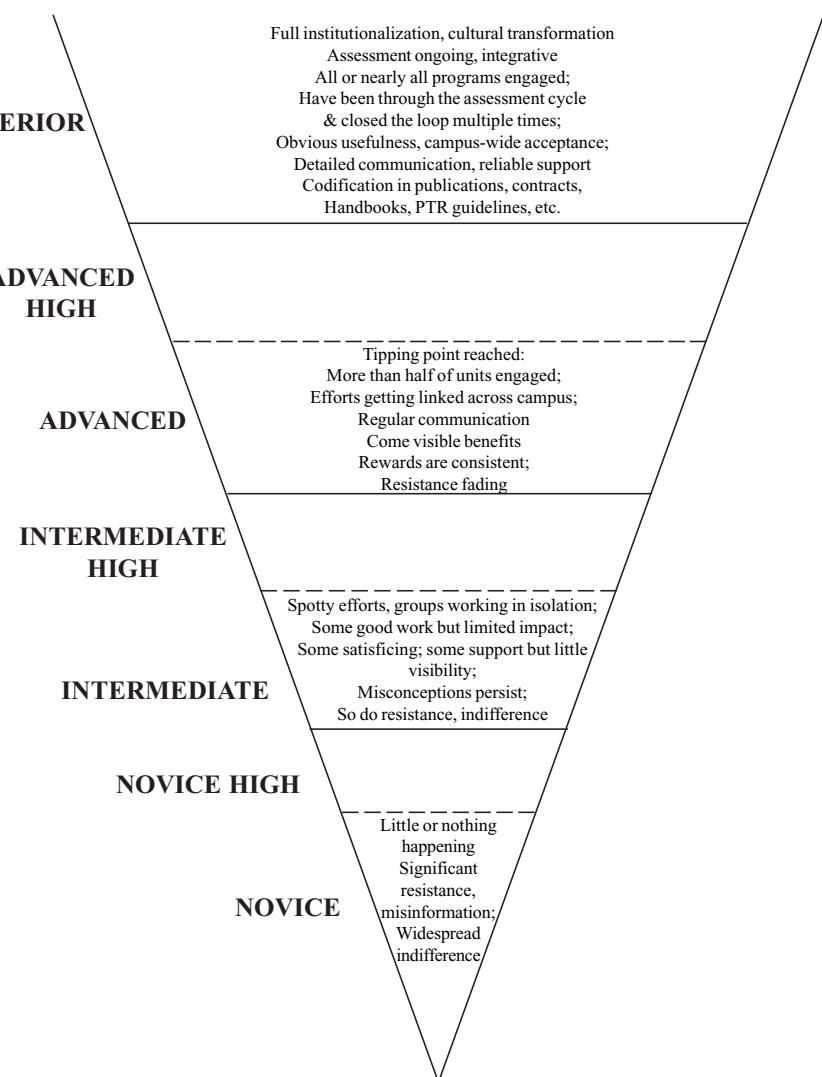
A few years ago Cécilia López, then an associate director of the North Central Association (NCA), conducted a study of approximately 600 NCA campuses. She reviewed the self-studies and team reports submitted to the association between 1989 and 1999 and discovered that despite a consistent message from the association over those ten years, remarkably few institutions had been able to move from planning for assessment to implementing it. Fewer still had moved from implementation to actually using findings for improvement of learning.

López also identified problems that had contributed to these results. She found that simple “awareness” of assessment was not enough; faculty needed opportunities to learn about assessment and how to do it well. Related to that, there were pervasive misunderstandings – about what assessment was, why it was necessary, and how to benefit from it – that prevented implementation. As a result, she found both emotional resistance and a lack of skills or knowledge as well as a lack of rewards for individuals and programs that carried out productive assessment. Her findings are unsurprising and probably generalizable to other regions.

López did not mention something else that seems relevant here: the nature of profound, integrated learning – in assessment as in other fields – for faculty and for students and others. Deep, transformative learning is not linear but rather exponential. For a beginning learner in any field, every new word or concept is a

window to a new world of knowledge, but it represents only a fragment of the full complexity of the field. As a learner becomes acquainted with more and more words, concepts, techniques, examples, proofs, exceptions and questions, there are more and more potential connections to be made, more and more situations both routine and exceptional to be dealt with. That means, to borrow from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages’ conceptual framework for oral proficiency, that while progress from “novice” to “intermediate” may be swift, it takes far more work to move from “intermediate” to “advanced,” and many multiples of that time and experience to approach “superior.” The inverted pyramid provides an apt graphical representation of this phenomenon.

## **THE ASSESSMENT PYRAMID**



With apologies to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and its criteria for oral proficiency in languages – BDW, 11/1/04

The point is that most institutions and accreditors have taken a rather superficial approach to the question of what it would take for an institution to achieve implementation of assessment at a superior level, grossly underestimating the time and effort involved. A charge to a committee, a trip to a conference, a few faculty development seminars, a plan – these were supposed to be adequate. They are not. To do assessment right requires a significant amount of new knowledge, genuine engagement, a shift in habitual practices, and a sufficient investment of time and opportunity to accomplish all that. So the question is: do we have the time, energy, and humility, as institutions and as individuals, to reach some functional level of proficiency? Are we capable of persisting to that point – or are we going to get stuck? Dancing well may look effortless, but it takes endless practice!

### **III. “The Masochism Tango”: Fear of consequences can doom good assessment; so can the absence of consequences.**

I frequently argue that assessment requires a safe environment in order to function with integrity and effectiveness. In other words, it's essential to dissociate it from program review and faculty evaluation. We know that anxiety makes people risk-averse. In evaluations, there is inevitably something at stake that leads to anxiety: a career, faculty lines, new facilities, equipment, sometimes even the very existence of the program. Under those circumstances, the temptation for faculty to game the system and produce good news is virtually irresistible. But with assessment, the point is not to produce “good news.” It is primarily to *improve*, and only secondarily to prove. The point cannot be simply to generate reams of data and then say, “See? We're excellent. Now leave us alone. Better yet, give us more resources.” The point is to say, “Here's the question we posed about learning. Here's the problem. Here's how we fixed it.”

I've been making that argument for years. It makes sense to me. People have listened and said it made sense to them, too. The problem is it's not working. I am not aware of any institution, in any region, that lost accreditation over the last ten or fifteen years because of a failure to do assessment. Surely that is a risk-free environment if ever there was one! It should have led institutions to ask hard questions about learning; to devise ambitious, innovative assessments; to make useful discoveries; and arrive at creative solutions. It didn't – or if it did, those findings are a closely-held secret.

Peter Ewell argues that assessment does, in fact, need to be “consequential,” and he's right. I would only add that assessment needs to be consequential in the right way. We can't simply go back to rewarding programs that prove they are “strong” and starving the “weak.” What would that mean? Maybe it means that the quality of an assessment effort is judged by a different set of criteria: not just the presence of a plan or a lot of Xs in a matrix, but the specificity of its questions and the effectiveness of its responses. Maybe it means broad participation and open discussion, both within and beyond the campus, about

what has been found and what has been done to achieve improvement in order to determine whether there is more general relevance to a discovery: broader applicability for a solution. Maybe it means collective introspection and meta-awareness of the sort that WASC now requires in its reflective essays, or the open dialogue between programs and reviewers that the ABET process now employs.

Consequences need to be there, too: significant rewards, but awarded because the campus can document that it has an effective assessment process and can show value added, not for maintaining the *status quo*, no matter how good that is. Consequences need to flow at the institutional and program levels, and on the individual level, too. Much has been made of faculty as the chief obstacle to assessment. But faculty are like everyone else. They're not masochists; they read the signals and follow the money. Why has it been so difficult to provide tangible, public rewards to faculty in tenure and promotion reviews? How far are we from that goal, and why on earth is it taking so long?

### **IV. “Twist and Shout”: Reporting is not communicating, and none of us, accreditors or academics, have communicated often enough and substantively enough to each other, to policy makers, or the general public.**

Good, meaningful assessment leads to substantive *findings* about student learning; we discover through assessment what students learn easily and well, what is more difficult, where the difficulties lie, and what to do about them. And yet, how many of us, at *any* assessment conference, have talked about the assessment process – strategies, resources, techniques, pitfalls, and the like – and how many of us have shared actual findings? Assessment gatherings over the last 10 to 15 years have offered a mind-numbing array of panels on process; actual findings or results of an intervention, in contrast, are exceedingly rare.

What sort of findings? Let me cite a few examples from my own experience. At a community college, the assessment committee looked at writing across the curriculum. We developed a template for a common assignment and a rubric for scoring the essays. Students were asked to respond to an article related to their course and then do four things: take a position in relation to the reading, organize the essay to support their position, develop their position drawing on their knowledge or experience, and demonstrate command of standard American English. We discovered that, across the board, students had particular difficulty with the third criterion: ability to develop or elaborate on their position. This was a useful finding; it provided explicit guidance to instructors in all kinds of courses about a central critical thinking and writing skill, and it gave them a focus for talking to their students about effective writing. Or there are the students who do well in math when they can plug in a formula but don't know how to approach an unstructured problem; surely this is a shared concern. Or there are the students who've studied abroad. In my language department, we routinely ask students to write a reflective essay about their experiences and

what they learned. They readily describe details of everyday life; what they seem unable to do, even with much urging, is get past the purely descriptive, past the level of “Oh, wow” and “I really changed a lot” to a deeper analysis of cultural values or how and why, exactly, they have changed.

I am dead certain that none of these phenomena are unique; I believe they are widely shared traits of U.S. students more generally, and they are things it would be useful to address beyond the local campus. Why don’t we? Perhaps faculty think such specifics would be of interest only to writing or math or foreign language instructors; perhaps they think they belong only at discipline-based conferences. Perhaps institutions are reluctant to reveal any problems at all. In that case, we are not modeling very effectively the courage and candor that good assessment requires.

I’m convinced that panels on problems like these would make for far more compelling assessment conferences than the current focus on how we recruited the members of our assessment committee, or why we introduced e-portfolios, or which data management program we purchased. It’s a little like scientists only ever talking about why they used a spectrophotometer, but never saying what they *found* when they used it.

We need to share our findings, aggregate them, see how generalizable they are across institutions, states or regions, and share the solutions. Peter Ewell, in WASC’s *Evidence Guide*, writes about how evidence of student learning should involve “multiple judgments of student performance.” There’s a need, he argues, for “more than one person to evaluate evidence of student learning,” and “data should be submitted for broad faculty discussion and action to make recommendations that will improve student learning results.” I submit that those “broad faculty judgments” should occur *inter-institutionally*, as well. Why not sessions on improving specific aspects of critical thinking or writing or mathematical understanding? Taking this notion a step farther, why not share these deliberations with the broader public? Why not make them partners, so that when a 15-year-old shows his parents an essay, they can say, “Yes, well, you’ve taken a position, but you haven’t really supported it. You just keep re-asserting it in slightly different words”? Imagine discussion about what is good critical thinking or responsible use of statistics actually entering our public discourse.

## **V. “Dancing Cheek to Cheek”: Accrediting agencies and higher education, informed by assessment and making common cause, must convey a concrete vision of educational quality and accountability to policy makers and the wider public.**

Of course, if we open up the discussion, chances are we will attract some attention. Would the lay public or policy makers be interested? Possibly. Should they be? Absolutely – but it should be an informed interest. How to achieve that? There would be a

translation challenge, to start with; we would have to explain our work in jargon-free terms. But it’s a challenge worth taking up, because the result could be educative both for us and for those other audiences, and we need their help. The public would learn something about writing or math or cultural analysis. They would also learn something important about education more generally: that it is about learning to think and express those thoughts, not just about memorization or regurgitation or responding to multiple-choice questions on standardized tests. They would learn that context matters and that most questions don’t have straightforward “right” answers. They might actually get engaged in debates about the nature of good education, or the value of critical thinking. So why don’t we do this? Why don’t we share more concrete information – with each other and with the general public – about what good academic performance is and how students can get there? Why don’t we fling open that window? The fresh air could be bracing. We might all dance faster and better.

At an AAHE conference last year I ran into Lee Shulman. I explained that I was there to lead a panel on accountability. “Well,” he said, “You tell them that the problem with policy makers is not that they’re asking hard questions. The problem is that the questions they’re asking aren’t hard *enough*.” That’s certainly not the way we’ve been inclined to approach accountability. Our approach has been to provide the requisite data – FTEs, retention and completion rates, tuition levels, rates of increase, whatever – knowing full well that these surrogate indicators do not say anything about the quality of the learning that students pay for or take away. Along with policy makers, we prefer to avoid the really hard questions.

Higher education has a responsibility to be accountable. We owe that much not only to legislatures or budget committees but also to taxpayers, students, their families, and each other. But we need to be clear about the kind of education we want to be accountable for. Higher education needs go on the offensive instead of being perpetually on the defensive – or missing in action. We need to seize the initiative and set the terms of discourse about educational quality and how we – not just as educators, but as a *society* – propose to achieve it. After all, students are the product of the sum of their experiences, in the classroom but also in their lives beyond the campus. We academics can influence their learning but we don’t control it, and all our audiences need to understand this.

How can we get from here to there? Higher education needs to exploit the possibilities of assessment and collaborate with accreditation associations. We need to go public with shared standards for college-level performance, with the problems we have diagnosed, and the solutions we propose. We need to demonstrate the complexity of educational outcomes that matter and create an informed, supportive public audience for our work. We need to put the onus on the public to complement our work, in the home, in the community, in the media. In the process, education might actually become a cultural value and our entire educational system, pre-K through 16, would benefit.

I am appalled by the mania for standardized testing that No Child Left Behind has spawned, but there are a couple of salutary things about this legislation that we must acknowledge. One of them is the message the legislation sends that education *matters*. Another is that we cannot afford to write off whole segments of our school population as incapable of learning. As a nation we pay lip service to the power of education to help people get ahead and lead rewarding lives. But the cultural messages that bombard young people today do not glorify educational values. Instead, popular culture celebrates wealth, celebrity, athletic prowess, power, and ruthless survivor instincts.

I'm reminded of an article that appeared in the *Hartford Courant* last winter. It dealt with a delay that school districts faced in getting their test scores back from the testing company. One of the things kids have to do, for NCLB and other purposes, is write an essay. Along with the rubric, the newspaper article included an excerpt from a piece of student writing that had been scored a "4" on a scale from "1" (the low end) to "5." It was a nice piece of writing, but the rubric suggested why it was not a "5." Surely this piece of writing would make an interesting subject for dinnertime conversation.

A public conversation would provide a more supportive environment for efforts to link higher education with K-12, too. Exhortations could be replaced by substantive collaboration on ways to achieve specific, publicly endorsed outcomes that are developed in primary and secondary schools and then brought to a higher level of proficiency in postsecondary study. In other words, articulation efforts could move beyond the current focus on curriculum and tackle concrete, widely understood deficiencies in outcomes.

Accreditation associations have a long tradition of non-disclosure and have been discomfited by recent calls for more transparency regarding member institutions' status and the findings of accreditation reviews. Assessment is a younger phenomenon

with more freedom to open this debate and set its terms, if we can find the courage to do so. Assessment gives us the tools for understanding and communicating more clearly about what good education is. It may be time for assessment to take the lead and open that more public conversation. The fact is that ultimately, education in this country needs not isolated improvements in this program or on that campus; to achieve real improvements in quality, education needs a more encompassing conceptual and practical infrastructure in a new environment of broad social support. That degree of reform won't be accomplished by a single entity; it will take collaboration from many directions.

Assessment and accreditation can demonstrate how it's done by taking the first steps together. How will the act be received by its audience? Whether we consider the audience to be academics, policy makers, or the wider public, the answer is: we don't know, because they're really not tuned in yet. But education, in contrast to entertainment, is an endeavor in which we – educators and the public alike – cannot afford simply to be passive consumers of the spectacle. ♦

*Dr. Barbara D. Wright is the Assessment Coordinator of Academic Affairs at Eastern Connecticut State University. Prior to that, she served as a faculty member in German at the University of Connecticut. During her tenure at UCONN she directed a FIPSE-funded project to assess a new general education curriculum, and from 1990 to 1992 she served as director of the American Association for Higher Education's Assessment Forum. From 1995 to 2001 she was a member of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, and she has participated in team visits for several regional accreditors. She has published on assessment and is frequently invited to campuses to speak and conduct workshops. She is especially interested in qualitative approaches to the assessment of general education's more challenging, seemingly ineffable goals. She can be reached at [WrightB@easternc.edu](mailto:WrightB@easternc.edu).*

# Assessment at Harold Washington College

by Jennifer Asimow and Raymonda Johnson

## A Brief History

Twenty years ago, most college faculty members, when considering the topic of assessment, would have said that assessment was a passing trend that would go the way of the “twelve-hour teaching load.” College faculty now know how wrong that conclusion would have been. Not only is assessment here to stay, but it is an ever evolving and growing institutional reality that has the potential to inform educational practice and impact student learning both in the classroom and at the institutional level.

Harold Washington College (HWC), one of the City Colleges of Chicago, is committed to upholding high institutional and academic standards and to understanding and improving student learning. The mission of the college is to sustain an environment that promotes optimal learning for all students, to gather and use assessment information to improve student learning, and to offer its students affordable and accessible opportunities for academic advancement, career development, and personal enrichment (Harold Washington College, 2003-2006 Catalog). Although the college’s assessment program has gone through many substantial changes over the past ten years, the college has been continually committed to improving student learning outcomes through a better and more comprehensive system of institutionalized assessment.

Senior faculty report that even though they did not call it “assessment,” good teachers have always prioritized student learning and have worked to improve student learning outcomes. At some level, assessment has been happening since the beginning of teaching and learning. Every examination of student learning made by a faculty member at the end of a term with the intention of doing something different the following term in order to improve student learning falls into the general area of assessment. This kind of assessment at the classroom, department, and program levels has been a part of any credible instructional program. Unfortunately, it was not until assessment became institutionalized that it has become recognized as an instrumental tool in bettering the learning process.

Dr. Cecilia Lopez, formerly the Associate Director of the Higher Learning Commission (1991-2003) joined the HWC community as Vice-President of Academic Affairs in the spring of 2003. Dr. Lopez assumed leadership of the Assessment Committee and infused it with new life. The original committee, with the support of administration, invited all faculty to get involved in the new assessment committee efforts. It was crucial that the committee was made up of faculty members from each program and/or department, that it include administration and distance learning representation, and that it have a student voice. In order to gain momentum, meetings were called weekly, and the committee hit the ground running. Under the guidance and expertise of Dr. Lopez, the committee and its goals began to take shape.

## Work Begins

The first order of business for the Assessment Committee was to establish cross-disciplinary sub-committees charged with the task of redefining the general education objectives of the college. Each general education objective was to be looked at by a separate cross-disciplinary committee. This work began as a one-day workshop held during registration week in the summer of 2003. As evidenced from the large turnout at this voluntary meeting, faculty were inspired to begin the process of cross-disciplinary dialogue. For many, it was a first opportunity to share ideas about teaching and learning with their colleagues who were experts in various academic disciplines. As a result of this workshop and the work that followed, the sub-committees were invigorated, the general education objectives of the college were defined, and student learning outcomes were written. As the college moved into the fall semester, the committee understood that it needed a written charge or constitution in order to continue its work and to be recognized as a legitimate body within the college. This was easier said than done. Members understood that the committee needed to be faculty driven. The charge needed to define the roles and responsibilities of its membership and the relationships between the committee and other governing bodies in the college.

Immediately prior to Dr. Lopez’s leadership, a full-time, tenured faculty member had chaired the Assessment Committee on a voluntary basis. Already, the committee knew that the workload for the Chair would require release time. The weekly meetings and the plans for active, on-going assessment required a weekly commitment commensurate with a full-time position. In fact, it was discovered that it is not unusual for the Chair of a college or university Assessment Committee to be granted full-time release for the position. As a result of these considerations, the Chair at HWC was granted 6 hours of release time from a 15-hour teaching load. It was also established that there be a Vice-Chair and that the committee have membership from each department. In addition, the Assessment Committee would have joint standing with student, faculty, and administrative entities in the deliberations of the Faculty Council.

## CCTST

The newly formed committee decided its first priority would be a college-wide assessment activity to assess the general education objective “to think critically and to analyze and solve problems” (Harold Washington College, 2003-2006 Catalog, p.128). The committee examined no fewer than 15 available measures of critical thinking skills before agreeing that the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) best suited the needs of the college. Committee members decided that faculty could choose to volunteer to administer the test to their students. It was thought

that, rather than having administration mandate involvement, faculty buy-in would be stronger and more sincere if instructors actively chose to participate. Much to the joy and surprise of the committee, over 80 faculty members volunteered to participate, resulting in the testing of over 1600 students.

A number of logistical problems were encountered in the administration of the test. The Committee had hoped students could be divided into cohorts, based on credits taken at the college, and competencies could be measured and compared across cohorts. Unfortunately, it was not possible to create the cohorts based on credits. Instead, adjustments were made after the test was given, which necessitated hours of hand-processing each test. It was also discovered that in the scoring process the college could not be compared directly to like-institutions, i.e. urban and ethnically diverse, because this information was not available from the test-makers. However, in the end, the results created a baseline against which the college could measure itself in the future.

Testing revealed HWC students performed, across the board, lower than the national average, but only slightly. That prompted the Committee to create a brochure to explain the results to the students, faculty, and administration. The brochure also provided students with the information necessary to acquire their personal test results. Because HWC students had performed lower than the national average on the CCTST, the Committee decided that more emphasis was needed to enhance critical thinking across the disciplines. Related to that, the committee decided that professional development for faculty in the area of critical thinking was appropriate. A one-day faculty workshop was developed, and over 60 faculty members attended. The workshop was organized and designed by faculty for faculty in an effort to continue to strengthen the support of critical thinking skills in students. Topics of the workshop included Socratic Dialogues, Critical Thinking and the Brain, and Writing to Support Critical Thinking. Three months following the workshop, the college invited Dr. Peter Facione, one of the authors of the CCTST, to speak to the faculty. These events were sponsored by the Assessment Committee and financially supported by HWC administration.

## SAILS

The second priority of the Assessment Committee was to assess the general education objective of using information resources and technology competently. The interdisciplinary subcommittee charged with defining this objective and researching appropriate assessment tools chose the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS), developed by Kent State. This on-line survey was quite different from the CCTST, primarily because it was on-line and therefore heavily dependent on technologically savvy people for its set up. Fortunately, the college has people who are both able and willing to support these efforts.

The SAILS test was administered by a group of volunteer faculty in the computer lab. Due to space, computer availability, and monitoring restraints, the test could be administered to only

one class of students at a time over the course of one week. Other problems arose due to the fact that faculty had to move their classes into the lab in order to conduct the test. Some students disappeared during the transition from classroom to lab, a few faculty forgot about their assigned times, and faculty who expected students to come directly to the lab discovered that a few students did not know how to find the lab. Even with these difficulties, by the end of the testing week, 777 students had participated in SAILS. The committee was pleased that HWC student results were comparable to national averages. As of this writing, the Committee has yet to decide what to do with the results. It is clear that the college should aspire to more than average achievement.

As we bring the assessment process full-circle, the Committee must consider how faculty training can impact student learning in the area of information literacy. Traditionally, information technology skills were the specialties of librarians in the areas of library science and research; but because modern scholarship requires that technology be embedded in every course, all faculty will benefit from professional development in the area of technology.

## CCSSE

In March of 2005, HWC will participate in an institution-wide survey of student engagement and satisfaction through the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). This survey was brought to committee attention by colleagues at Loyola University Chicago, who were looking for ways to generate their own data about a new program entitled *Community College Learning and Teaching* (CCLT). The CCLT program is supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) and is a partnership between Loyola University and Harold Washington College. It involves specialized, graduate level instruction for community college faculty in which concentrated study related to the community college and its student population is pursued. Loyola University was looking to describe the level of engagement of Harold Washington students who were associated with faculty involved in the CCLT program. Student engagement is an indication of how connected students feel to their instructors, to their peers, and to their college. It is believed that the more engaged students are, the better they perform academically.

Because Loyola University was supporting HWC's involvement in the survey, the Assessment Committee decided to use the CCSSE as an opportunity to gather its own data about student engagement. Two other programs in the college, Child Development and Art, chose to sample their courses in order to acquire baseline data for self-studies in the accreditation process.

## Lessons Learned

As the Harold Washington College Assessment Committee reviews its work thus far and plans for future activities, it affirms the following ideas, which it has learned through experience and which will guide future efforts.

1. No measure is perfect. There are problems with each tool: some significant, others less so. If you wait to find or create the perfect tool, you will not get underway.
2. Voluntary participation is critical to success. Faculty buy-in strengthens the mission and provides the framework necessary to get the work done.
3. Financial support must be established. Assessment costs money. Good assessment costs a lot of money.
4. The committee must create solid ways of communicating its work to the college's constituents. Keeping everyone informed should be an underlying goal of the work. Consider a monthly newsletter devoted solely to assessment issues.
5. The data generated from assessment activities must be used to improve student learning. Otherwise, the process is meaningless. ♦

*Jennifer Asimow, M.Ed., is Assistant Professor of Child Development at Harold Washington College and Chair of the Assessment Committee. She may be reached at [jasimow@ccc.edu](mailto:jasimow@ccc.edu).*

*Raymonda Johnson is Professor Emeritus of the Department of English and Speech at Harold Washington College and an Ed.D. student in Educational Organization and Leadership in the Community College Executive Leadership Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She may be reached at [rjohnso@uiuc.edu](mailto:rjohnso@uiuc.edu).*

# Implementing Academic Assessment: Parkland College's Journey

by Mary Emmons

Parkland College is “a comprehensive (public) community college in Illinois dedicated to providing programs and services of high quality to its students and committed to continuous improvement, to academic achievement and its documentation, and to the concept of shared governance” (Parkland College 2004-2005 Catalog, Mission and Purpose Statement, p. 10). The phrase, “committed to continuous improvement, to academic achievement and its documentation” is the College’s promise to assess learning outcomes throughout the institution. With this promise, Parkland College began its journey in academic assessment.

As with many colleges, the process of institutionalizing academic assessment began with asking administrators and faculty to address questions such as: 1) What is academic assessment? 2) What more does it involve than documenting student learning through course grades? 3) How does it differ from program review, which includes seat time and retention rates as measures? As the administration was committed to a faculty-driven process, identifying a faculty committee was the logical next step.

## The Committee

The Academic Assessment Committee (AAC) was formed in 1989 as one of several committees of the Parkland College Association (PCA). Invitations to join the Committee were extended to full time faculty members from each of nine academic departments; two department chairs; representatives from the Counseling and Career Placement and Assessment offices; elected and appointed members from the PCA; the Vice-President of Academic Affairs; and the Director of Institutional Research, Evaluation, and Planning.

The value of the resulting 19-member Committee was integral in gaining campus-wide input from those who would ultimately administer the assessment. The size of the Committee was also a drawback and impeded progress to tackle the general education piece of the academic assessment puzzle. A smaller committee, including one full-time faculty member selected from the departments responsible for general education courses, was determined to be a better committee structure to enable the assessment of general education and efficiently produce more focused work. As a result, a sub committee of the AAC for General Education Academic Assessment was formed. The purpose of the subcommittee was (and is) to assess and make recommendations to the Curriculum Committee regarding general education core courses and objectives.

## Getting Started

At the onset, the AAC was charged with learning about the academic discipline of outcomes assessment and sharing their

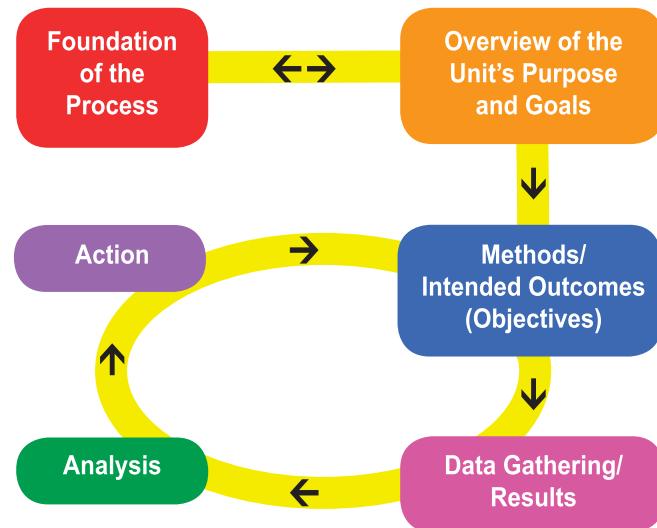
knowledge of assessment, as well as “best practices,” with other faculty. Through this monumental task, the Committee wrestled with vast information on academic assessment, potential connections to North Central Association (NCA) requirements, and strategies for disseminating information to faculty. The Committee experienced perceived and physical barriers to the concept of assessing and documenting student learning in publicly reported hard data. College faculty feared that a “Big Brother” report could threaten academic freedom, while adding just “one more thing” to their already lengthy to-do lists. They also found that trying to understand assessment language often lead to confusion, such as unclear distinctions between direct and indirect measures. For instance, some faculty asked, “Why is it that seat time and course grades no longer fit the college’s full assessment model?” In response to these issues, the Committee adjusted its approach. The Committee recognized the need to develop and promote an overall assessment plan for the college with clearly delineated rules for assessment. The outcome of their efforts was an assessment cycle model.

## The Assessment Cycle

In 1998, NCA provided community colleges with recommendations and general guidelines for best practices to serve as framework to follow. The AAC at Parkland embraced this guidance, while carefully ensuring that the process fit the culture of their institution. The result was a model they entitled the Assessment Cycle. This model was deliberately chosen to represent the ongoing nature of assessment.

## ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT CYCLE

*Assessing Students' Learning in  
Parkland College's Academic Programs*



## Applying the Assessment Cycle

Much discussion centered on categorizing the object of the assessment. The Committee started with an interest in examining program learning outcomes. Yet, how should “program” be defined? In some of the departments defining the program was simple. Each health profession, such as Nursing, had a course of study that began with introductory courses and ended with degree completion. It was understood that assessing learning for such programs was done throughout the two years, but outcomes could be measured at the end by the standardized professional licensure examination.

Defining “program” proved more difficult in other areas. In parts of the college, faculty identified course clusters (groups of related courses within a department) as a program. Each course cluster culminated with a capstone course, where outcomes embedded throughout the cluster could be measured at the end of the sequence. This approach works well for areas where students must take the full course sequence and capstone. Yet again, this is not the case for all areas.

There were some academic areas where students frequently maneuvered in and out of sequences, and perhaps did not take the expected capstone course. In other cases, students were hired away before completing the curriculum, thus hampering accurate measurement of program effectiveness. Because of the difficulty collecting meaningful data, many faculty changed their focus to measuring key concepts within courses where enrollment was high. As a result, English 101 and 102, Mathematics 107, Psychology 101, and Sociology 101 have course assessment plans even though they are not “programs.”

## Managing Information

Currently, there are over 90 “programs” (including some clusters) that are required to assess and document learning outcomes. Parkland’s assessment website, [www.parkland.edu/aac](http://www.parkland.edu/aac), assists in the dissemination of information that has resulted from the assessment efforts across the college. As courses and programs shift, the information management system flexes to accommodate new data. Website management helps all faculty handle the volume of program reports and provides continuity to the data. A Microsoft Access program houses data such as dates, types of measures used, persons responsible for assessment, College Mission and Purposes statements, types of direct and indirect measures used, as well as actual data collected and the faculty’s analysis and action. Individual program reports can be updated and printed. The website has proved to be valuable to its internal audience and to others at colleges across the country that are going through the same process.

## Charting Progress

The Committee created a visual model to both chart progress and to motivate departments and programs along the journey. A bar graph was developed that displayed progress within the cycle model. A second chart represented each department’s

progress along a timeline with “Assessment Cycle implementation” and “NCA visit” as the anchor points. The graphs were distributed at the beginning of the academic year at the all-college faculty meeting, posted above many copy machines, and posted on the assessment web site. Initial reactions to the high visibility of these working documents were mixed. Some healthy discussion (and even shades of competition) emerged, as well as some concern about boiling large efforts down to one simple chart. The end result of displaying each department’s assessment progress was increased motivation for most faculty to demonstrate that their programs were meeting the college’s assessment criteria. In addition, the bar graph was an easy way to display the progress of assessment to the board of trustees and other stakeholders with vested interest in the initiative.

## Outcomes of the Assessment Journey

The process of institutionalizing assessment takes time and manifests itself in many forms. As Parkland grew, and with it programs and courses increased, the Committee worked tirelessly to keep up with the growth as it impacted assessment. To ensure early impact, the AAC requested that the Curriculum Committee require all new programs to produce an approved academic assessment plan prior to appearing before the Curriculum Committee for program approval. The strategy was clear. If a plan were in place to assess learning outcomes before any new program started, there would be a culture of assessing from day one. The Curriculum Committee agreed to this strategy, and it was supported by the administration.

## The NCA Visit: Not the Journey’s End!

NCA site visitors wrote the following report in 2002: “Assessment of student academic achievement meets its purpose of documenting student learning for continuous improvement of courses and programs. . . . Most academic programs and all general education programs have developed outcomes that have a foundation in the College’s mission, purposes, and core values. Assessment findings are being incorporated into program review, planning, and budget processes. Faculty involvement is outstanding. Assessment of general education courses has been implemented in almost all general education courses. Budgetary support exists for faculty to participate in assessment conferences and other learning experiences.”

Although the NCA report was impressive, we knew the most important aspect of outcome assessment was the lessons learned in the process of meeting the accreditation guidelines.

## Lessons Learned

Assessing learning outcomes has been a valuable journey. While difficult at times, it was worthwhile not only for the purpose of accreditation, but also for the dialogue it has inspired within programs, between programs, and across disciplines. Entire curricula have been redesigned as a result of lessons learned through academic assessment. At this point the lessons that are the most salient are:

## Getting Started

- Establish a committee that is inclusive of all departments within the institution, while balancing size and functionality.
- Develop a model that serves as a plan to guide the process.
- Establish policies and procedures as soon as possible to help-direct the journey.
- Develop a method to track progress that can be used to both measure and motivate.

## Disseminating Results

- Standardize the reporting form to increase readability. (During the NCA visit, the site visitors were impressed with the clarity provided by the consistent way in which data were reported.)
- Develop a body of evidence that documents that assessment is being done. The evidence should be gathered program-by-program, and should include: the program's goal, the goal as it relates to specified mission and purpose statements of the college, the objectives and competency levels, actual dates of data collection, and the faculty's analysis and actions related to the data.
- Require regular updates of faculty documentation regarding how changes were made in the classroom to improve student learning. (These reports demonstrate the ongoing nature of assessment. They create a body of evidence that is not only necessary for a NCA accreditation, but also for its historical value as new faculty and administrators come on board.)
- Determine how many programs identify that they are fulfilling specified Purpose statements and publish the results.

## Building Continued Support

- Find effective partners such as The Curriculum Committee to ensure that new programs begin with assessment policies in place.
- Recognize and cultivate the essential, strong administrative support which will be key to implementation of decisions made by your AAC.

## Shaping the Future

- Recognize that the debate over the object of assessment (e.g. programs, clusters, courses) will continue as the college grows and changes. Be prepared for and open to ongoing discussion.
- Provide new faculty with the right to modify assessments to reflect their professional judgment of important learning outcomes.
- Respect the process. As the Academic Assessment Committee matures, so will its focus. Less emphasis will be placed on "how," and more effort will be directed at institutionalizing the concept as an important part of continuous improvement.
- Remember that Academic Assessment is ongoing – a journey of continuous discovery! ♦

*Mary Emmons, M.Ed., serves as Chair of the Academic Assessment Committee at Parkland College, Champaign, Illinois. She is also the co-director of the Dental Hygiene Program. She can be reached at [memmons@parkland.edu](mailto:memmons@parkland.edu).*

## The Culture of Assessment

by Charles F. Yokomoto

Decades of research and writings demonstrate that culture affects an organization's learning, effectiveness, and employee satisfaction. But, what role does culture play in this new wave of institutional assessment? There is such great variety in the paths of assessment available, and so many assert great success. How can you find the path that is best for your institution? A successful plan begins with understanding your organizational culture. Consider the following:

- **Teaching vs. Research**

What is the primary mission of your institution?  
How might individuals from each school of thought approach institutional assessment?

- **Autonomy vs. Coordination**

How accustomed are your departments to working together?  
How much resistance might you expect to the perception of giving up ground?  
In what ways can duplication of efforts across the institution be avoided?  
What value is placed on individual or academic freedoms?  
Should the assessment plan be the same for all departments?

- **Details vs. Big Picture**

Do conversations about improvement begin with academic principles and campus-wide goals?  
Or, do these conversations begin with course level objectives?

- **Numerical vs. Broader Context**

Are highly comparable, hard data numbers valued most?  
Or, is contextual interpretation and a softer style a better fit?

- **Wide-span Improvements vs. Targeted Improvements**

Is it important to implement as many suggested improvements as possible?  
Or, is it important to target only a select few of suggested improvements in areas that are of greatest interest to constituent groups?  
How much time is available to develop and implement improvements?

- **Accreditation vs. Continuous Improvement**

Is the motivation for institutional assessment a pragmatic, accreditation approach?  
Or, is the motivation a more idealistic, continuous improvement approach?

Of course, the reality is that no culture is totally one-sided, and cultures will contain individuals who fall all over the spectrum. As a result, there are no easy answers. What is known is that not taking characteristics of organizational culture into consideration can lead to mismatches and bumpy transitions. For smoother, more successful institutional assessment endeavors, take the time to consider and incorporate your organizational culture. ♦

*Charles F. Yokomoto, Ph.D., is a professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, and the Director of Assessment at Purdue School of Engineering and Technology, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). He can be reached at [yokomoto@iupui.edu](mailto:yokomoto@iupui.edu).*

## ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE

The 2005 Assessment Institute will be held October 23-25, 2005, at the University Conference Center and Hotel, Indianapolis, Indiana. Pre-Institute Workshops: October 23, 2005. Institute Dates: October 24 - 25, 2005. For more information, see <http://www.planning.iupui.edu/conferences/national/nationalconf.html>

## ASSESSMENT COURSE

This Fall, Dr. Tom Grayson will teach EOL 490 OA, "Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education" to the Community College Executive Leadership cohort (CCEL) at the University of Illinois. There will be limited availability for students not enrolled in the cohort to take this course. If you are interested in learning more about this opportunity, please contact Ronda Rigdon at 217-244-3495 or Dr. Debra Bragg at 217-244-9390.

---

The Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) was established in 1989 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. *Our mission is to provide research, leadership, and service to community college leaders and assist in improving the quality of education in the Illinois community college system.* Projects of this office are supported by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), and are closely coordinated with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). The contents of the UPDATE newsletter do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of OCCRL, the ICCB, or the ISBE.

### STAFF

**Debra D. Bragg, Ph.D.**, Director, OCCRL and Professor, UIUC

**Catherine Kirby, Ed.M.**, UPDATE Editor and Information Specialist, UIUC

**Linda Iliff**, UPDATE Production Manager and Administrative Assistant, UIUC

---



**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
51 Gerty Drive, 129 CRC  
Champaign, IL 61820  
Phone: (217) 244-9390  
Fax: (217) 244-0851  
<http://occrl.ed.uiuc.edu>**