A Report to the UNK Campus
General Education and Assessment

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) hosted a conference entitled “General Education and Assessment: Creating Shared Responsibility for Learning Across the Curriculum,” in Atlanta, GA. UNK sent a team from the assessment committee and the General Studies Council to the Conference. The delegation included Debbie Bridges (General Studies Council), Theresa Wadkins (Assessment Committee), Jeanne Butler (Coordinator of Assessment and Director of CTE), and Bill Wozniak (Director of Assessment).

Over 500 faculty members and administrators from at least 200 different institutions attended the conference. Some institutions attended the conference to present their success stories, others attended to learn strategies to solve their assessment problems. There was no shortage of institutions with problems similar to our own. Even though there is some consolation that other institutions have similar problems, all of them were very worried about assessment and how it will affect accreditation.

In order to contribute to the campus discussion concerning General Studies, we are presenting some observations from the conference.

• Higher Education is undergoing a paradigm shift from a focus on the teacher to a focus on the learner. “… the transition from input to outcomes as a rationale for quality education.”

• “Assessment is useless unless the results are used for improvement.”

• As accrediting agencies develop their guidelines, there will be greater emphasis on the institution’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which must be based on “ongoing evaluation and planning process” using student learning outcome data.

• “The best curriculum is one that is aligned with the learning needs of the students on a specific campus and that the faculty believe in so that they teach it with a passion, commitment and intentionality—only then can they help their students engage fully with its purposes and opportunities.” --Ann S. Ferren, Senior Fellow, AAC&U

• "Pervasive, faculty driven assessment of student learning outcomes is a cultural change..." as stated by Duncan Sibley from Michigan State University. In a presentation from MSU, Sibley and others discussed that changing the culture costs money and involves the faculty changing from an attitude of hostility to an attitude of productivity. The latter discussion focused on providing faculty with examples of assessment and encouraging faculty to debate about which forms of assessment were productive in relation to their disciplines, teaching styles and philosophies.

• Our General Studies Program is classified as a distributed general education program, i.e., categories of acceptable courses from which each student chooses. The problem with
distributed programs is that assessment typically is also distributed. In order to do this, it is essential that the professors teaching within each category of courses are aware of the student learning outcomes and strive to achieve them. At UNK there seems to be considerable variety among professors’ goals – even within a GS category.

• Related to the previous point, an article written by Gitanjali Kaul and Jeffrey Ford of Cleveland State University for the North Central Association (“Advancing Campus Interest in General Education Curriculum via Assessment”) includes a description of “…five conceptions of an educational core, all of which imply different definitions of intended general education outcomes”
  1. A body of knowledge. “is at the basis of a notion of a canon… This notion enjoys comparatively little favor within the academy at present.”
  2. A high level of intellectual performance. “…The buzz word associated with this conception is critical thinking…”
  3. Introduction to the Principle Intellectual Disciplines and Methodologies. “This view of the core underlies and justifies distribution requirements…”
  4. Values. “…including a commitment to service, an appreciation of diverse opinions and cultures, and sensitivity to social injustice…”
  5. Basic skills. “Essentially, these are reading, writing, and arithmetic…”

• From another article written by Eliot Elfner of St Norbert College for the North Central Association (“Assessment of General Education and Values Outcomes”): “Most institutional mission statements generally describe their sense of identity, the types of students served, the geographic region from which students are drawn, and types of programs offered. Additionally, most institutions of higher learning address in their mission statements a variety of desired student learning outcomes that they deem to be most important. Included are learning outcomes focused on an in-depth level of understanding of a particular field of study and the more general learning outcomes the institution views as necessary for a well-educated graduate. It is in this last category that the general education component of the academic program is validated. For most institutions, statements related to ethical and values-oriented learning outcomes are included in this component of an institution’s mission statement.”

• There was considerable discussion concerning strategies for change in Higher Education. All had “arrows sticking out of their backs,” so to speak. My own observation (Wozniak) is that we (the faculty) need to prepare our students to live in a rapidly changing world, yet are nervous, if not unwilling, to change our ways of doing things.

Other more specific observations.

• There is some interesting work at Drury University concerning the assessment of Science and Math Values. They have developed a regionally-normed indirect measure. Contact Bill Wozniak for more information.
Concerning UNK’s WI program in comparison to other institutions’s writing programs: The culminating experience in writing is not part of the general education program but rather part of the majors and the Honors Program. As a result, it varies considerably from student to student. The effectiveness of writing education may vary considerably.