Chapter 5: Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment of Student Learning

Overview

This chapter details how the University at Albany assesses itself and one of its most fundamental outcomes, student learning. What follows is a discussion and review of institutional assessment processes and assessment of student learning processes and outcomes at UAlbany. Concerning the latter, the chapter addresses the degree to which UAlbany has policies and procedures in place to ensure at graduation, or other appropriate points in time, that its students have the knowledge, skills, and competencies the University professes to instill in them.

Much of the data and information considered are available to University employees and prospective students. Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) is a major source of official data about the University. IRPE has a shared responsibility for the development of campus administrative databases, as well as for database information management and analysis. Data and information about the University are available on IRPE’s Website. For example, the Website maintains electronic files that provide current members of the University, as well as prospective students and other interested parties, with substantial information about University-wide assessments. The information includes enrollment, student profiles, degrees awarded, graduate admission trends, retention, and course planning materials, as well as organizational charts and a common data set. The Website also provides information about the enrollment and graduation rates of students in all programs through its department profiles, which may be very informative for prospective students and their parents. Information about the spring 2008 graduate survey is available on the Web page http://www.albany.edu/ir/uasurvey/gradsurvey.pdf. Moreover, the Middle States Wiki contains valuable information for the broad constituency of part-time faculty, full-time faculty, and administrative staff. In fall 2008, after the General Education Assessment Committee (GEAC), the Council on Academic Assessment (CAA), and the provost discussed information sharing, the University decided to post General Education assessment reports on a Web page for viewing by both internal and external audiences.

The CAA agreed, however, that, in order to foster honest self-reflection, the University had to maintain certain restrictions on the viewing of potentially sensitive internal documents. In 2007, the CAA approved a protocol allowing interested members of the University community to read the self-study reports in hard copy form, upon request. Additionally, the CAA required parties external to the University to formally petition IRPE to gain access to internal assessment documents. While the sharing of information in the spirit of transparency is widely supported by

1 http://www.albany.edu/ir/whatdata.htm
2 http://www.albany.edu/assessment/gen_ed_assess.html
faculty and the administration, the University to date has not developed a formal process for proactively sharing information about assessment with various stakeholders. While there is at times an acknowledged inherent conflict between governance, administrative processes, and their need for confidentiality, with the need for transparency and broader information-sharing, UAlbany should consider developing formal policies and procedures for proactively sharing information about departmental assessment activities with various members of the University community, rather than the current “reactive” policy.

Part I of this chapter focuses on institutional assessment while Part II focuses on assessment of student learning. Although we identify opportunities for improvement throughout the report, we summarize those opportunities as a list of recommendations at the end of each major part.

**Part I. Institutional Assessment**

**The Evolution of UAlbany’s Assessment Process**

Since the University’s Middle States re-accreditation in 2000, and Middle States’ subsequent revision of its accreditation standards in 2002 to emphasize the use of evidence-based assessment processes throughout the institution, a number of operational units across the campus have begun to systematically assess their operations and services provided to students.

An Institutional Assessment Plan (IAP) was developed in 2004 by the provost’s Assessment Advisory Committee (PAAC). The IAP contains protocols and guidelines for assessing majors. Additionally, the IAP contains the State University of New York (SUNY) General Education Assessment Plan.

The IAP acknowledges UAlbany’s long history of using assessment to inform campus decision-making on a number of levels with regard to programmatic and operational matters affecting students, social, intellectual, and personal development. It is important to note that many of the ongoing activities described in the IAP did not arise in response to a call for an Assessment Plan, but rather gave rise to it. Assessment and linkages to planning and decision-making across the University precede the more recent national call to arms for accountability in teaching, learning, and institutional effectiveness. As a result, the IAP is better viewed as a formal statement of operating procedures at the University. The IAP attempts to enhance past assessment activities by laying out a comprehensive approach across the institution with regard to offices and programs, assessment plan standards, implementation consistency, and documentation of assessment activity. The IAP is a shared statement of the University community, and a commitment to share assessment results with students and other concerned parties.

The University establishes assessment activities on the basis of its mission and strategic goals. Underlying this approach is the belief that “good assessment is good research” and that, as a research university, UAlbany possesses the faculty and staff expertise, and the conviction, to use this expertise to evaluate itself, seek improvements, and demonstrate its efficiency and effectiveness in a manner transparent to its various stakeholders.
The IAP document originally guided each vice president to develop an assessment plan describing how their division supports and measures the achievement of divisional and institutional goals. Divisional, academic unit, and administrative assessment plans and annual activity reports would be shared with or made available to various campus constituencies to promote collegial review and community awareness of assessment processes and efforts. IAP’s provisions for academic and administrative unit assessment plans were complemented by the 2005 Compact Planning process, which focused on selective investment proposals. Academic unit assessment plans now exist in virtually every department and program, owing to requirements for developing them as part of the University’s cyclic program-review process. However, the development and implementation of administrative unit assessment plans have lagged considerably, with the exception of units in the Division of Student Success, where assessment plans and annual reports have been compiled for the better part of the last decade.

In response to a SUNY mandate, the University developed its 2006 Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment (SCBA) plan, which calls for use of SUNY-wide rubrics for assessing student writing and critical thinking, use of nationally-normed tests in mathematics (later changed to locally developed, but SUNY-approved rubrics), and a planned spring 2008 administering of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The UAlbany IAP plan builds upon the University’s longstanding history of assessment and sets forth a formal framework for developing, conducting, utilizing, and communicating assessment activities, in both teaching and learning and in the assessment of institutional effectiveness.

Although the various activities and missions of a research university are interrelated, for organizational purposes the University’s proposed assessment plan lays out procedures and expectations for assessment in the following two areas: Student learning, which encompasses major assessment and General Education assessment; and institutional effectiveness – in research, public service, academic support, and administrative services.

While most administrative units are involved to some degree in activities that gauge success and inform the planning and budgeting processes, the University does not require those units to develop formal assessment plans across vice presidential divisions. (Administrative units developed compact plans and strategic initiative proposals from late 2005 through 2007.) At present, the University focuses more on day-to-day operational matters. Certainly, offering non-academic (administrative) units some blueprint or road map for assessment in their areas — requiring the submission and ongoing refinement of assessment plans and encouraging the coordination of the assessment process through designated personnel at the division and/or unit level — would be an important first step in bringing administrative assessment in line with academic assessment.

On the academic side, the IAP, as noted above, incorporates existing frameworks for assessment of majors, as prescribed in the program review process by the CAA, and for assessment of the General Education program, as specified in the General Education Assessment Plan (GEAP), which the General Education Committee of the Undergraduate Academic Council developed and which the SUNY General Education and Assessment Review (GEAR) group approved. These two formal processes are contained in their entirety within the campus-wide plan; the University
has faithfully executed them via the submission of annual school/college assessment reports in 2006 and 2007. Academic units perform assessments; however, they do so with varying degrees of rigor, as demonstrated in a review of assessment plans (see below, Part I, Academic Program Assessments section).

The CAA, constituted in 2004 under a revision to the faculty bylaws, oversees both assessments of academic programs (undergraduate and graduate) and the campus’s cyclical review of its General Education program. Additionally, the president and provost, through IRPE, sponsor assessment workshops and seminars on-campus. Worth noting is that in 2006 the University Senate reassigned the General Education Assessment Subcommittee (GEAS) from the Undergraduate Academic Council’s (UAC) General Education Committee, which has primary oversight of the University’s General Education program, to a committee (the General Education Assessment Committee) of the CAA. It was felt that the assessment of the General Education program should not reside with the committee charged with program oversight, but instead with the CAA.

The University developed several staff and administrative positions, as well as committees that support assessment activities:

- **Director of Program Review and Assessment** – The University created this position in 2001 to maintain and advance momentum regarding academic assessment of majors and General Education program. The position has been filled since July 2007 on an interim basis.

- **Assistant vice president for strategic planning and assessment** – In 2003, the University created this position and, in 2006, redefined it to assistant vice president for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness. The job focus changed from overall campus-wide responsibility for developing assessment protocols and policy to focusing on academic assessment and oversight for the campus’s Institutional Research (IR) office. The University also renamed the IR office to the Office of IRPE. Currently, this position reports directly to the provost.

- **The appointment of both a vice provost for institutional assessment as well as a vice provost for planning and administration occurred with the appointments of a new president and provost in 2005. Both positions were vacated with the transition in senior campus leadership and neither has been filled since.**

- **The provost’s assessment advisory committee** – The PAAC advised the provost and vice president for Academic Affairs and was charged with ensuring that the University’s policies, procedures, and guidelines regarding assessment-related activities met internal needs and external mandates. The PAAC was eliminated after it helped establish the campus Institutional Assessment Plan (IAP). Today, the Council on Academic Assessment accomplishes this work through its Program Review Committee (PRC), done in cooperation with IRPE staff.

The campus financially supports the academic program review process. Each year, approximately four to eight departments have their self-studies reviewed by external reviewers,
who also visit campus to collect additional information and explore the content areas further. These visits and associated costs are covered by the campus financial plan, and are not borne by the units. Total costs typically run in the $30-$45K range annually and include the total costs for external reviewers and visits. This figure does not include UAlbany staff time or other expenditures (e.g. surveys) in support of assessments or program reviews.

Financial support for professional development and training of the director of Program Review and Assessment and/or other faculty/staff is not part of the planning and budgeting process. Occasional assessment-related conferences or meetings for those in assessment planning roles (e.g., associate dean for General Education or director of Program Review and Assessment) have been borne out of base office budgets and the provost’s office.

**Evaluating and Improving Programs: UAlbany’s Assessment Processes**

The University’s IAP, briefly mentioned above, seeks to ensure a high-quality academic experience for its students and to promote institutional effectiveness in achieving University goals. As discussed in Chapter 2, the University’s long-term vision and goals, while somewhat dated, have been used over the self-study period to inform the UAlbany approach to assessment. Shorter-term objectives and guidance to inform assessment processes are offered by various University planning documents, such as the Mission Review II and SUNY Memorandum of Understanding compacts. Divisional and school/college strategic plans are also reviewed by relevant administrators and the assessment subcommittee. Within these frameworks, the IAP provides a road map and expectations for assessment processes that are used throughout the institution to fulfill its mission.

It is clear, in the subcommittee’s opinion, that the University believes strongly that assessment promotes operational effectiveness and efficiency across the University. While student learning may be the primary emphasis of assessment research and public concern, a comprehensive approach to assessment recognizes that the operations of administrative units also add to the complexity of the organizational milieu upon which institutional effectiveness is predicated, as they support the University’s student learning, research, and public service missions.

In the subcommittee’s opinion, it appears that the University has made important progress in developing a campus culture of assessment as well as a foundation from which future teaching and learning improvements will emerge. The University aligns the SUNY Assessment in the Major initiative with external accreditation through national associations, where such external reviews exist. Furthermore, where assessments are administered institutionally, they are complemented with a wide array of evaluations and peer reviews carried out at the departmental level. In addition, major programs are subject to approval by the undergraduate and graduate Academic Councils of the University Senate, SUNY central administration, and the State Education Department. Many of the institution’s professional programs are regularly reviewed for accreditation purposes.

As a result, the quality of Albany’s educational programs is assessed in many complementary ways by both internal and external peers, editors, reviewers, funding institutions, budget panels,
and accrediting agencies. In this context, student grades, self-reported assessments, faculty teaching evaluations, periodic program reviews, alumni studies, and assessment information about student attainment in the major all constitute complementary ways of obtaining useful feedback in order to improve learning.

In 1968, UAlbany became one the first institutions in the nation to undertake a systematic evaluation of all graduate and undergraduate programs on a regular cycle. After a decade of individual program reviews leading to the strengthening, merger and termination of many Albany programs, the University in 1978 launched a series of student-cohort studies that placed the campus in the forefront of assessment research. These assessment efforts, which have been conducted on a continual basis ever since, have given the University a rich array of evaluative databases, including student opinion surveys, cohort studies, and alumni studies.

Compact Planning Initiative

The University’s management team, in spring 2005, instituted the Compact Planning process as a means to establish priorities for action by academic and administrative units, as well as by the University as a whole. The University implemented the process to align University goals and strategies with activities in both academic and administrative units. The University used specific performance and outcome measures to hold academic and administrative units accountable and to demonstrate publicly the quality and impact of the University’s programs and services.  

The faculty and/or staff within base units, under the direction of the unit head and through the interactions of the unit head and the supervisor, developed the Compact Plans. For academic Compact Plans, base units were the various academic departments; for administrative plans, the base units were determined by the vice president at a level appropriate for compact purposes. This encompassed units that had a director with budgetary authority and were accountable for particular services and performance. Deans and vice presidents bound the base unit Compact Plans together to create one Compact Plan for the school/college or division.

The Compact Planning process was short-lived due to sudden and unanticipated changes in leadership. While Compacts were used to guide selective investment decisions for two years following the start of the Compact Planning process, there has not been any institution-wide move to recommit to these plans.

Today, the University’s IAP lays out expectations for systematic and sustained efforts to develop assessment plans and timetables for implementation. Any assessment plan, whether enacted by

3 A Compact Plan is an annual, bilateral, written management agreement between an academic or administrative unit and the University administration, and is the result of a series of meetings in which the unit leadership, as informed by its faculty and/or staff, presents priorities and issues and develops feasible strategies and targets in consultation with University administrators. Compact Plans reflect a shared and agreed upon understanding of unit and University goals and priorities.
an academic or non-academic administrative unit, should institute a continuous process of reflection and improvement over time. Units are encouraged to spread assessment activities over a multi-year period so that, in any given year, they implement at least one aspect of the assessment plan, be it the definition of learning or service goals, the development of performance metrics, data collection and analysis of results, or discussions about incorporating assessment results into curriculum review or redesigning of operations.

A secondary goal of phasing in assessment plan implementation in manageable steps is to afford units the time to discuss assessment findings with program or unit faculty, staff, and students, and to benefit from the feedback of faculty governance assemblies. A deliberately paced and managed implementation also provides opportunities to document how assessment results have been used to affirm or improve the level of student learning or service quality. The PAAC looks to the deans and vice presidents to ensure timely implementation of their units’ assessment plans.

Divisional (Administrative) Assessment Plans

While a diversity of approaches to assessing the administrative endeavors of administrative units is desirable and welcome, the University’s IAP specifies a standardized approach to which units undergoing assessment should adhere. However, the plan does not outline explicit guidelines or timetables for the delivery of administrative assessment plans or various assessment activities. The SUNY Student Opinion Survey (SOS), in use since the mid 1980s, has been a primary instrument for assessing student service and administrative units across vice presidential divisions. The University augments the SOS with local and nationally designed assessment instruments for administrative units.

Each University vice president is responsible for developing a divisional assessment plan that ensures that units affecting the student experience or impacting the achievement of institutional goals engage in formal assessment processes consistent with the five *UAlbany Assessment Protocol Components*. These are highlighted in the IAP. According to this Protocol, each assessment plan should: 1) identify goals and objectives within the framework of institutional and divisional missions; 2) develop qualitative and quantitative metrics to determine whether goals and objectives are being achieved; 3) incorporate the results of assessments into ongoing operations, planning and budgeting decisions; 4) document processes of evaluation and improvement; and 5) provide procedures for communicating assessment plans and the manner in which assessment results are used by various campus constituencies. To ensure that assessment activities are truly continuous in nature, each unit provides annual assessment progress reports to its respective vice president. However, this process would benefit from a formal assessment road map, or outline, that would allow administrative units to develop a set of formal assessment plans. Additionally, the University may want to consider assigning assessment coordinators to administrative units to provide guidance as the units develop their assessment plans.

Academic (Program) Assessment Plans

In accordance with existing organizational lines of reporting responsibility, deans are ultimately responsible for the development and implementation of assessment plans (according to the
UAlbany Assessment Protocol Components, noted earlier) with regard to teaching and student learning in the academic programs within their schools and colleges. The vice provost for Undergraduate Education and the dean of Graduate Studies are responsible for the assessment of University-wide programs encompassing their respective student charges.

In order to ensure that assessment plans are reasonably implemented, each dean makes sure that academic departments under their purview provide annual assessment activity reports for each academic program. Annual assessment activity reports of the academic units should 1) state the learning goals assessed in that year; 2) describe the metrics or assessment instruments used; 3) discuss assessment findings; and 4) if applicable, indicate how the findings have been used to influence the curriculum. In accordance with the preexisting practice of sharing academic assessment plans with the CAA for review and comment, deans make available to the CAA the annual assessment activity summaries for their academic programs to the CAA for review and comment. The CAA’s focus is on the process of the assessment rather than the outcome.

Academic programs adhere to assessment processes and submit assessment reports as described above. While assessment processes and reports are formal and mostly complete, there is variability in the assessment reports and assessment measures that programs use (see the Assessment Process Guidelines, Timetable and Evaluation section, below, and Part II of this report).

Departmental assessment plans and school/college activity reports are forwarded or made available the Program Review Committee of the Council on Academic Assessment (CAA) in order to keep the University community apprised of the campus assessment process, and to provide opportunities for the sharing of best practices, and a collegial review of assessment practices. Feedback from the CAA is common practice. PAAC was initially charged with annually reviewing and promoting this flow of information between various Senate councils (in addition to the CAA) and providing feedback to the authoring units. This two-way information flow was intended to provide opportunities to share best practices and for the collegial review of assessment practices. While the PAAC ceased to meet after it helped establish the campus Institutional Assessment Plan (IAP), the CAA is sufficiently filling this void through its Program Review Committee (PRC), and in cooperation with IRPE staff. In the Division for Student Success, the division’s assessment council reviews assessment plans and reports, and facilitates two-way communication between the vice president’s office and unit heads in the division.

General Education Assessment Plan

The University’s General Education Assessment Plan (GEAP) contains procedures for ensuring that the CAA’s General Education Assessment Committee (GEAC) and the vice provost for Undergraduate Education are able to determine the degree to which the University has met the learning objectives of each General Education category. GEAP also makes it possible for faculty and administrators to identify areas that need to be improved; responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of the assessment plan resides with GEAC. Each year, several of the General Education course categories undergo review and, the following year, GEAC conducts a review
of the categories for General Education requirements. One aspect of this review includes a critical examination of the methodologies used by faculty whose courses were included in General Education assessment. In 2002, the University instituted a three-year schedule for the assessment of the General Education program.

GEAC examines course syllabi and documents it develops (Appendix 5.2 Assessment Forms 1 and 2, available at http://www.albany.edu/assessment/Gen%20Ed%20Arts%20Form%201S09.doc and http://www.albany.edu/assessment/Gen%20Ed%20Arts%20Form%202S09.doc) to collect information about the measures used to examine and reported results of student learning. The purposes of this review are to: 1) ensure that assessment methods and sample items were reported for each objective; 2) identify effective and ineffective assessment methods; and 3) make concrete suggestions for improvement, wherever possible. Members of GEAC share their findings, identify important patterns across General Education categories, then issue a report on their findings; this includes recommendations for improving areas with deficiencies.

What is evident when reviewing the University’s efforts surrounding assessment is that great progress has been made in the past five years to formalize assessment processes, make those processes routine, and modify the culture in such a way that assessment becomes a critical facet in decision-making.

Certainly, work in the area of academic assessment has laid a foundation for a sound and deliberate set of assessment processes for academic programs. It is evident that the work being done by IRPE and the CAA continues to move academic units towards more thoughtful program assessments. IRPE and the CAA are constantly improving assessment processes and recognize that process improvement is a “never-ending” journey. There is sufficient support from IRPE, the University’s academic units, their respective schools/colleges, and faculty governance to continually improve assessment activities and, as a result, assessment will remain a high priority for years to come. Regrettably, the same cannot be said of administrative assessment. While certain areas (e.g., Student Success) have implemented certain assessment activities, others administrative units are behind. Although the Compact Planning process engaged both academic and administrative units in self-evaluation, the relative brevity of the process did not lend itself to a sustained long-term effort that sought to tie unit and institutional priorities to resource allocation. The Compact Plans, however, appear to be the only occasion during which administrative units collectively engaged in a systematic evaluation of their programs and priorities. Consequently, the University should continue to enhance its academic assessment processes and increase its efforts at developing and implementing sustainable assessment processes for administrative units.

Some of the shortcomings in the area of systematic and sustained assessment appear to come as a result of executive turnover. The departure of key executives has resulted in less than full direction with regard to assessment. Although the PAAC was formed in 2004, it has not met or engaged various constituencies, most importantly vice presidential divisions, in order to advance administrative unit assessment. IRPE and the CAA have engaged schools/colleges to appoint ‘assessment liaisons’ and, this year, they have also asked academic units to appoint ‘assessment liaisons’.
coordinators.’ However, the efforts of IRPE and CAA would be enhanced with the reinvigoration of the PAAC. Consequently, the University should consider reconvening the PAAC to hasten the penetration of formal assessment processes throughout the University and further improve those processes.

Assessment Process: Guidelines, Timetable and Evaluation

Established procedures guide the review of undergraduate and graduate programs on a seven-year review cycle. UAlbany’s academic programs formally develop assessment plans every seven years as part of their self-studies, and implement program improvements throughout the intervening years. The approaches to developing program assessment plans have been quite varied, and this is encouraged, as each academic program is unique in its own right and necessarily tailors its assessment plan to what works for that particular program.

As indicated, periodic reviews of undergraduate and graduate programs are part of an ongoing process of programmatic self-improvement. These reviews include: the preparation of a self-study report; an external review of the self-study report; a departmental response to the external review; a review of these documents and preparation of recommendations by the CAA; and an administrative review of all recommendations resulting from the process.

In consultation with the CAA and with the provost’s approval, the vice provost for Undergraduate Education and the dean of Graduate Studies schedule program reviews. The current interim director of Program Review and Assessment coordinates the program review process. The office of either Undergraduate Education or Graduate Studies and IRPE provide administrative support. Emerging campus priorities, mandated external reviews from SUNY system administration, and accrediting, registration, and licensing bodies establish and adjust the review schedule. As mentioned earlier, guidelines and timetables for administrative unit assessments are limited.

The assessment process includes provisions for evaluating the process itself and disseminating its results. Responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of the assessment plan resides with the CAA. The CAA oversees both assessments of academic programs (undergraduate and graduate) and the campus’s cyclical review of its General Education program, which each year assesses two to three of the 14 student learning categories on a rolling basis. The role of the CAA has steadily evolved toward being concerned with the design of academic assessment processes, and making them more formative and useful in teaching and learning. It is also empowered by its Senate charge to make recommendations to administrators and academic units for the improvement of the process.

The CAA employs two subcommittees, namely GEAC and the Program Review Committee, to perform the internal review of academic programs. GEAC examines course syllabi, General Education assessment results, and student perception surveys to report on the status of General Education and the GEAP. As with any new entity, the CAA initially struggled to clarify its role and fell behind in its review process. In 2007-2008, the Council reviewed all self-study reports completed within the previous academic year and established a schedule for reviewing all self-
study reports due during the 2008-2009 academic year. The CAA is currently reviewing ways to improve the timing of its internal review process.

The CAA has strengthened its internal assessment processes through the creation of the Program Review Committee, which reviews academic assessment reports and provides timely feedback to program and department chairs and their deans. The University could improve the CAA’s effectiveness and efficiency if it stabilized the committee’s membership, allowing it to deal with the considerable learning curve that new members face. CAA members could then devote more time and attention to assessment needs and less time to training new Senate Council members. On the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 4, issues around Senate Council membership turnover and the need to foster broader faculty participation in Senate activities must also be considered in this equation. Outside the CAA, some academic units have streamlined assessment activities, which prevents overloading the faculty and helps focus efforts on developing quality assessment tools. The University needs a mechanism for quickly sharing best practices as they emerge in the academic units. The “Student Outcomes Annual Reports 2007-2008” lists additional recommendations that would assist academic departments in advancing their assessment plans and activities. A review of annual assessment activity reports revealed a lack of clarity in how faculty use the assessment results. The distinction between drafting a plan and actually executing it is also key; it is unclear how consistently these assessments turn into concrete change. This finding suggests that assessment planning at UAlbany could lead to more subsequent changes in programs. Therefore, the University should continue to educate faculty about the programmatic benefits of assessment, and encourage new ideas on how to improve the assessment planning process.

On an annual basis, each of the University’s nine schools/colleges submits a School/College Report to IRPE. These reports, compiled since 2006/2007, encompass the respective school’s/college’s assessment activities for the preceding year. IRPE and CAA review these reports and offer constructive feedback to the academic units and associated deans. The self-study reports, external reviews, departmental responses, and IRPE and CAA feedback are available from the 2002 – 2003 academic year to the present. Additionally, the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes in the Major is a summary report on campus-based assessments of student learning outcomes in undergraduate majors. These reports also date back to the 2002 – 2003 academic year.

Academic Program Assessments

As mentioned, assessments of graduate and undergraduate programs at UAlbany occur on a seven-year cycle. The process consists of a program self-study and report, a site visit by external reviewers, an external reviewer report, administrative and governance review of the documents, administrative and governance recommendations to the program, a departmental response to the recommendations, and a departmental plan for ongoing program improvement. The process itself requires the involvement not only of faculty, staff and students from within the department or program, but also that of individuals from outside the unit. IRPE is involved throughout the process as a resource for information and assistance to programs. The self-study report is distributed to external reviewers as well as to campus administration (vice provost for
Undergraduate Education and/or dean of Graduate Studies). The external reviewer report and a summary assessment report are submitted to SUNY system administration. All assessment documents are submitted to the CAA. Additionally, the provost’s office requests an annual report from each college describing their assessment activities.

To evaluate the quality of various aspects of the assessment plans, the Middle States self-study Subcommittee on Academic Assessment selected 16 academic units that represented a range of substantive programs in the sciences, arts, humanities, and professions (Table 5.3). Twelve of the programs had no formal accreditation processes, while the remaining four programs, namely Masters of Social Work, Masters in Regional Planning, Information Science/MSIS, and the School of Business, had associated accreditation processes. (The subcommittee did not evaluate the programs themselves; rather the subcommittee evaluated the programs’ assessment plans.)

The Subcommittee on Academic Assessment used an assessment plan rubric to evaluate the assessment plans, which contained multiple assessment domains. The rubric’s domains correspond to those that appear in the Middle States Institutional Self-Study Design document, viz., a clear mission statement, articulated learning objectives, a design for the program that meets the learning objectives, an evaluation of current student learning opportunities, a candid appraisal of faculty, a clear plan for subsequent assessments, an evaluation of resources and facilities, and overall conclusions. The rubric’s domains (Table 5.4) are also consistent with the University’s 1998 Strategic Plan goals. Two independent raters reviewed each assessment plan on each of the domains. Raters categorized each assessment plan domain as “excellent” or “needs improvement.” For example, an assessment plan’s mission statement received an “excellent” rating if it was clearly stated and adhered to the University’s mission. A mission statement received a “needs improvement” rating if it was incompatible with the University’s mission statement. (Domains in the “needs improvement” category could still contain substantial useful information without reaching “excellent.”) The inter-rater reliability averaged over 70%.

The examination of the assessment plans reveals several recurring themes. First and foremost, assessment plans have clearly become extensive and detailed. The process is obviously effortful for the participating programs and undoubtedly takes time away from other aspects of teaching, scholarship, and administration. Thus, any changes to alter the assessment process that develops the plans must lead to benefits that outweigh the costs of the time involved to implement those changes.

The assessment plan domain received the highest number (87%) of “excellent” ratings among all domains considered. Programs consistently articulated a process for continued direct and indirect assessments of student learning. Most of these emphasized quantitative as well as qualitative methods of assessments. The best of these also detailed plans to use the information to improve the program. The domains involving mission statements and learning outcomes were close behind the assessment domain, with over 80% of programs receiving an “excellent” rating. Mission statements were clear and dovetailed nicely with the University’s mission. They also appeared consistent with other aspects of the program, including their design, the strengths of the faculty and students, and the available resources. Learning outcomes reflected the stated mission
of the program and lent themselves to simple, intuitively appealing measurement. The best assessments of learning outcomes clearly delineated what a graduate would have learned.

Evaluations of faculty and the conclusions drawn in the assessments received the next best rankings, with 75% of programs receiving “excellent” ratings in these domains. The best assessments of faculty quality included current vitae, elaboration on current teaching and scholarship, and linkage of these to the mission statement. Those assessments that needed improvement often neglected to include recent vitae. Ensuring that current vitae are included should prove an easy way to improve assessments in this domain. The conclusions drawn in each assessment were also comparably strong. The best articulated a five-year plan that incorporated the findings of the assessment itself. Those that received “needs improvement” ratings often had intriguing goals but failed to articulate a timetable or plan of action. Connecting the results of the assessment to those that were detailed in the study's conclusions seems a good way to improve in this domain without adding inordinate labor.

The assessments of student opportunities and the designs of the programs received the next highest ratings, with over 68% of the assessment plans receiving an “excellent” mark. The best assessments of student opportunities revealed numerous experiences that required work outside of the classroom, but built on classroom learning. These experiences were consistent with the program’s stated mission. These assessments also included a sense of the number of students that participated in these experiences. Program assessments judged to need improvement in this domain frequently failed to include details of out-of-class experiences or had few available. Designs for programs were comparably strong. The best of these explained the sequence of coursework and other experiences with a clear rationale for the progression. They also included details about the advisement process that led students through the appropriate experiences. The few that needed improvement often left out details about advisement, which seems easily remedied.

The weakest domain of the assessments concerned evaluations of resources and facilities, which frequently went unmentioned. Only 50% of programs received an “excellent” rating in this domain. This assessment of resources and facilities is one of the few that is consistently subpar. Perhaps programs did not emphasize this domain because of a perception that changes in facilities and resources might prove difficult. Future assessments can include more details on perceptions of support, resources, and facilities, and could actually help the University’s overall planning and budgeting processes by having needs more clearly demonstrated and tied to program goals. Without a clear description of the facilities, resources, and support available to a program, it is difficult to assess whether they are adequate to support the program’s mission and goals.

Based on the above analyses, the University may consider asking programs to enhance their assessment reports by having them include timetables for implementing plans related to the conclusions drawn in their assessments. This procedure would ensure that program improvements occur in a straightforward manner. Programs should also include the current vitae of all faculty and staff, and should elaborate on the role of out-of-class experiences when appropriate. Explanations and examples of activities outside of standard lectures and seminars,
including supervised research, would also strengthen the assessments. Moreover, assessment reports should detail exactly how advisement works, especially with regard to its impact on the sequencing of courses and how these dovetail with program goals. Finally, all programs should provide detailed comments about available support, resources, and facilities that can lead to concrete recommendations for improvement.

**Administrative Department Assessments**

As mentioned above, the University used the Compact Planning process for a short time (2005-2007). Each academic and administrative unit submitted a detailed report that included its mission and function, goals and objectives, proposed initiatives, and an assessment plan for each initiative. The Selective Investment Committee reviewed all Compact Plans and prioritized them, then budget and resource allocations were made to those units determined to have the highest priority initiatives related to the overall University mission and goals. The Compact Planning process was initially intended to be an ongoing process that would align University goals and strategies.

Even though the Compact Planning process was not formally continued on campus, some administrative units found the process beneficial to their operations and have continued similar efforts on their own by routinely looking at their goals and objectives and considering new initiatives to help further those goals, as well as the overall University goals. Most notably, the units within the Division of Student Success have continued a formal assessment process, with each unit completing an annual report of its assessment activities and results as they relate to the unit’s mission and goals. The division has created a Student Success Assessment Committee, which serves as an internal resource for the subunits as they develop assessment plans and reports. It also advises the Vice President for Student Success. There are also two subcommittees, the Assessment Planning Subcommittee, which reviews unit assessment plans and reports, and the Assessment Report Subcommittee, which reviews executive summaries and reports concerning divisional assessment activities.

Many of the administrative units at UAlbany, with the exception of the Division for Student Success, do not have formal assessment plans in place to evaluate their performance and goals achievement. That does not mean, however, that there are not informal assessment activities in place. In order to evaluate the quality of assessment activities in the administrative departments, two divisions that include solely administrative units were chosen for more in-depth review. Some of the units within each division are student service offices, while others have little or no student contact. The divisions chosen were the Division of Finance and Business and the Division of Student Success. As in the review of academic program assessments, the adequacy of the assessments in place, and not the quality of the offices, was evaluated.

The assessments of the units in these divisions appear to require individualized sets of domains and criteria. For example, ongoing Finance and Business activities help ensure that the units meet aspects of their missions in fiscally responsible ways. In a sense, external audits by both independent accounting firms, federal and state agencies, and SUNY for many of the units (State Accounting, Sponsored Funds Financial Management, Purchasing and Contracts, Equipment
Management, Human Resources, and the Student Loan Services Center) serve as a form of assessment for Finance and Business units. Another example is customer satisfaction surveys conducted by Parking and Mass Transit, as well as Facilities Management. The campus also has a state-mandated internal control program that provides periodic reviews of each unit’s missions, goals, policies, procedures, and operations. The reviews are performed jointly by the campus’ assistant internal control coordinator, associate counsel, and information security officer. While these reviews and testing are not as structured or detailed as the assessments of academic programs, they do help provide another view of the operations of each unit on campus.

The units within the Division of Student Success have a number of formal assessment processes that are more consistent with those sought by academic units and the University’s IAP. These various assessment processes include each unit submitting an annual report of its activities each year, creating a three-year assessment plan that outlines the various assessment activities to be undertaken in a given year, maintaining assessment dashboards or key performance indicators as well as developing and updating during the course of the year a series of strategic priorities. All assessment activities relate to the unit’s mission and goals. Additionally, each unit has a designated assessment coordinator charged with overseeing assessment activities in their unit.

At the divisional level, there is a Student Success Assessment Council, which serves as an internal resource for the subunits as they develop assessment plans and reports. It also advises the vice president for Student Success. There are also two subcommittees, the Assessment Planning Subcommittee, which reviews unit assessment plans and reports, and the Assessment Report Subcommittee, which reviews executive summaries and reports concerning divisional assessment activities. Additionally, the division maintains an extensive assessment Website (www.albany.edu/studentaffairs/assessment) which also includes the annual briefing book that features data from each of the division’s 13 units. The vice president’s office also maintains a five year division-wide assessment plan and oversees unit self-studies each summer. Most recently, the division partnered with StudentVoice, a national student affairs assessment organization, to further facilitate the assessment of programs and services division-wide.

Part II. Assessment of Student Learning

Integrating Situational Outcomes with Goals

At the institutional level, assessment of student learning outcomes is integrated into the University at Albany Goals and Priorities. Assessment of student learning outcomes is also integrated into the University's statement of strategic planning, as described in Appendix A of Charting the Future: Creating a New Learning Environment for the 21st Century A statement of strategic values, which appeared in 1998. Within this document, Strategic Value #1, Engaged Learning, is said to focus on "the active and enthusiastic involvement of both students and faculty with the learning process – at every stage and level. Faculty and students will come together in a common quest to appreciate inherited wisdom of the past and to participate in the discovery of new knowledge.”
At the program and course levels, alignment to those University values is demonstrated in multiple ways. At the program level, the University reviews all academic programs on a periodic basis, including yearly assessment reports. Some programs maintain separate subject-specific national or regional accreditation. As detailed previously, the University’s programs engage in a self-study on a seven-year cycle. The University's Procedures for the Joint Review of Undergraduate and Graduate Programs, Part V, requires that assessment plans be filed, assessment results be reviewed annually, and that feedback/improvement loops be part of an iterative process to assess and improve student learning.

To support the assessment of student learning in each academic unit, the University developed a Practitioner’s Guide to Program Review. As noted earlier, the position of director of Program Review and Assessment was created in 2002 to provide support to all academic units, track assessment activities, and report results to the CAA and the provost. A Web page documenting the assessment process, with related links, is available at http://www.albany.edu/assessment/index.html.

By reviewing learning outcomes, providing feedback on assessment methodology and encouraging the use of assessment data to promote enhanced student learning through curricular and pedagogical change, the University is actively seeking to provide “clarity of purpose and coherence in our curriculum,” a guiding principle of the UAlbany’s 1998 Strategic Plan.

Guided by this institutional system, 19 academic programs within 16 academic units (Table 5.3) were reviewed by the subcommittee, as were 43 randomly selected course syllabi (Table 5.5) for evidence of program and course-level use of clearly stated student learning objectives. Of the programs reviewed, all 19 programs specifically listed or named expected student learning objectives. This often took the form of a matrix that listed program goals with connected student assessments. For the 43 syllabi requested, three were not submitted and three were independent study courses without a syllabus requirement. Of 37 remaining, 29 had clearly stated student learning outcomes and eight syllabi did not provide any information about student learning outcomes. The syllabi displayed a range of basic to more elaborate means of showing outcomes, such as a short listing of subject-specific learning goals to longer lists connecting the course content to programmatic assessment requirements. For independent studies, student learning outcomes are generally incorporated in the agreement form, which, upon agreeing on a study topic both faculty and students sign. Overall, the data collection indicated 100% of the programs specifically listed student learning objectives and 78% of the syllabi reviewed included clearly stated student learning outcomes. University policy requires that course syllabi for the General Education courses always list learning outcomes for this category of classes.

At the heart of UAlbany’s assessment system is program-level decision-making about learning outcome goals and assessments. Each program’s faculty members make decisions about learning goals and how to assess those goals, both at a course and overall program level. This discipline-related process is important for national accreditation and external review systems in which disciplines have unique standards, routines, and expectations. In the UAlbany assessment process, the external reviews provide critical insight into how particular programs meet the relevant goals of the extended discipline. These discipline-related program decisions connect to the institutional learning outcome goals and mission-related practices in a variety of ways. First,
as outlined in the *Practitioner's Guide to Program Review*, the program-learning goals are a critical component of the annual assessment process, including the related assessments of those goals. Second, there are University-wide assessment processes, such as surveys of student opinions and experiences. With results provided on University Websites and at meetings, these assessments do provide some insight into University goals and expectations in terms of the questions and foci of the surveys. Third, there are numerous review processes at both the development stages of courses and programs (e.g., University academic councils) and for the long-term and ongoing program assessment (e.g., Council on Academic Assessment). In turn, these councils report to the University Senate, which advises the provost on academic matters. While these institutional-level practices contribute to the overall assessment system, they do not on their own provide a set of institutional-level learning outcome goals.

**Assessment of Student Learning**

Appendix C of the *Practitioner's Guide to Program Review* includes a list of examples for direct evidence of student learning. The list includes:

- Student work in capstone courses
- Student portfolios
- ETS/GRE items
- Pre-test, post-test program exams
- Licensure exam items
- Performances and presentations
- Comprehensive examinations
- Master's thesis or doctoral dissertation

A review of annual assessment activity reports and self-study reports for all 64 programs in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and seven additional programs across the University reveals that all annual assessment activity reports and the most recent self-study reports overwhelmingly show the use of direct evidence of student learning. Only four did not show any direct evidence in 2007-08. Programs that are nationally accredited, such as the Bachelor's of Social Welfare and Master's of Social Welfare in the School of Social Welfare and the programs in the School of Business also have assessment plans that include direct evidence. When reviewing the assessment data, it is apparent that many of these programs also had indirect evidence of student learning and many were using this evidence to direct program improvements.

A review of the 19 programs, including both annual assessment activity reports and self-study reports, revealed that a majority of programs had clearly stated student learning goals with specific assessments attached. However, the programs had a broad range in terms of the quality of these assessments and the specific acknowledgement of how these assessments might be used to inform decision-making. For example, some programs relied primarily on course-level data, such as a course grade or course-specific assignments. In one case, a single course was responsible for covering all program goals and assessing them. However, across programs there
were many instances of multiple assessments providing a wide range of assessment information that had the potential to inform program decision-making.

A review of annual assessment activity reports revealed a lack of clarity in how faculty use the assessment results. Each report asks simply to record “changes/planned changes,” but does not ask for details. The reports submitted for 2007-08 indicated that programs made changes to teaching, curriculum and programs, but the majority of these changes do not appear to link directly back to evidence of student learning. In CAS, for instance, a review of all annual assessment activity reports indicated that less than one third (27.5%) of the programs indicated changes/planned changes that were strongly linked to the assessment results, another 5% were moderately linked, while over half (53.5%) were weakly linked.

As discussed in Part I of this report, UAlbany employs a well-documented, organized, systematic, and sustained assessment process to evaluate and improve student learning. This includes program, department, and University levels of assessment. Within this process, a review of annual assessment activity reports and self-study reports indicates a wide range of qualitative and/or quantitative measures used across campus. Across campus, many degrees rely on standard measures such as course grades, overall GPA, and a culminating experience (e.g., portfolio). Beyond that, individual measures are closely aligned to the disciplines: one program might value recitals/performances and another a licensure exam. In many ways, the assessments used for self-study seemed to reflect the expertise and experience of program faculty engaged in the specific type of program assessment. For example, one nationally accredited degree listed multiple assessments (e.g., surveys, field ratings, licensure exams), while a few of the degrees newer to this process focused on internal assessments, such as a course grade and overall GPA.

**Faculty and Staff Collaboration**

Assessment of learning has affected collaboration in several significant ways. Within schools and departments, faculty and staff use assessment data to shape curriculum within programs. By drawing other faculty into the process of defining learning goals and collecting data, a much larger group of faculty within each department or school is becoming involved in the collaborative process of evaluating curriculum and learning success within courses. Beyond the program level, University-wide curriculum committees at the undergraduate and graduate levels review curricular changes; these are approved at many levels, in some cases involving the University Senate and approval of the president.

The interim director of Program Review and Assessment reviews all annual assessment activity reports and provides feedback, thereby facilitating ideas and best practices across the campus, while allowing units to develop their own assessment of learning processes in ways that are unique and meaningful to them. The CAA reviews these reports. Through CAA, the faculty, staff, and administrators can vet practices and provide feedback to improve assessment processes throughout the University. At the University level, the Institute for Teaching, Learning, and Academic Leadership (ITLAL) hosts workshops and consults with faculty individually, or in groups, to help develop best practices and assessment models spanning undergraduate curriculum, General Education, and different academic units. Finally, assessment seminars
hosted by the provost’s office have been held annually since 2006. These seminars provide a means for chairs, deans and school/college liaisons to learn more about the University's assessment processes and results from the prior year’s assessment cycle activities, and foster the sharing of assessment information with additional faculty.

**Student Participation in Assessment**

Student learning is at the heart of the assessment of learning. Students are involved in the assessment process through membership on curriculum committees in some academic units; in addition, both graduate and undergraduate student representatives are invited to join CAA to review, critique, and comment on assessment reports and issues. For many years, students have participated in the University’s Student Instructional Rating Form (SIRF) course evaluations or departmentally-developed alternatives for feedback. In 2008, ITLAL initiated a new mid-course feedback process, where invited students, in some cases, are able to help shape mid-semester course changes that improve their learning on a just-in-time basis.

Student feedback is included in units via programmatic, exit (graduation) and alumni surveys. These indirect measures of student learning are considered alongside direct measures in providing information used in curricular reform. As was previously mentioned, learning goals are present within a majority of course syllabi, bringing students into the learning process by clearly identifying what they are to learn. In some instances, programmatic learning goals are displayed on Websites and discussed in new student orientation programs, which involve students actively in their own personal learning process. One department publishes learning goals on bookmarks that are given to all students at the beginning of their graduate program. Students who are told up front what to expect from the program of study become partners in the attainment of that knowledge and/or voice feedback if those programmatic learning goals are not accomplished. In most of the program-related site visits for both national accreditation and internal program review, auditors/reviewers meet with students to further attain information about their views on courses, assessments, and program development; these meetings provide relevant feedback to faculty members on program objectives and assessments. Self-studies within departments and programs can include focus groups with faculty, staff, and students. Many also invite external reviewers from comparable programs and departments to provide detailed feedback.

**Dissemination of Assessment Results**

Self-studies involve department and program faculty; the review of self-study reports involves University faculty and staff. Reports are available to anyone in the University community needing examples of program reviews. Certain confidentiality restrictions apply; current protocol, established by the CAA in fall 2007, discourages the electronic sharing of self-study to limit the sharing of sensitive information. Upon request, the interim director of Program Review and Assessment will provide a hard copy of a requested self-study report, given the approval by the department chair.
Following the self-study and site visit, the Program Review Committee of the CAA reviews the documents. Membership on CAA and its subcommittees includes faculty and professional staff from different programs, schools and colleges across the University. Current practice is for the CAA to review and share a report with the chair and the dean within one academic year of the site visit. This shift to a one-year response stems from faculty concerns in earlier years that the feedback needed a faster schedule in order for faculty to consider and potentially implement suggested changes. The process facilitates the dissemination, analysis and discussion at the University level and communication among all academic units.

While the self-study has always included a section on assessment and the expectation that assessment would be ongoing and continually inform improvements, annual reporting has been inconsistent. The provost’s office requested annual assessment activity reports from each academic unit; academic programs now submit annual assessment activity reports on assessment activities, results and changes/planned changes made subsequent to the prior report. School and college liaisons (i.e., primarily deans, assistant deans, and a vice dean) prepare a report summarizing the activities and submit this and assessment matrices to the interim director of Program Review and Assessment, who provides written feedback to each school, college, and program, as well to the provost. All of these documents are shared with the CAA.

In terms of general review, deans of the schools and colleges are copied on emails about the reports and feedback from the Interim Director of Program Review and Assessment, but the school/college liaisons share the actual documents with school or college faculty. At the program/departmental level there is no official protocol for how assessment results are disseminated, analyzed, or discussed among the faculty, or with external stakeholders, and consequently little public information about the University’s academic assessments is available. The University initiated a formal assessment review process by the CAA in August 2008 (focusing at that time on 2007-08 assessment activities). The CAA now annually reviews the school and college reports, assessment matrices, feedback, and reports to make recommendations for improving assessment. Currently, the reports and feedback are not shared in writing with the University faculty or students. That said, the provost's Annual Assessment Seminar (2005, 2008, 2009) is used as a vehicle to share information on campus assessment activities with deans, chairs and school/college assessment liaisons. The information provided typically focuses on departmental assessment reports and processes, shared best practices, and discussion of results and assessment strategies.

Quality of Assessment Processes

The quality of student learning assessment processes and outcomes is fundamental to the University’s educational processes in that it enables the University to determine how well (or poorly) its programs are performing in terms of a central goal, namely student learning. The University cannot be sure if its educational processes are effective without articulating learning outcomes, designing and implementing suitable assessments, and interpreting the associated results. Thus, an examination of assessment processes is crucial.
As part of the campus’s Middle States self-study preparation, 16 academic programs (Table 5.3) were reviewed by the Subcommittee to assess the quality of their assessment processes. Self-study reports, annual assessment activity reports, feedback on those reports from the Interim Director of Program Review and Assessment, student-learning-outcomes annual reports, and, when available, external accreditation reports were reviewed. To perform the review, the subcommittee created the rubric depicted in Table 5.6 and used it to evaluate the quality of the assessments and stated outcomes. The domains assessed are listed in the left-most column, and the columns to the right denote the degree to which the domain is considered “Exemplary,” “Adequate,” “Inadequate,” or simply “Unavailable.”

Within the context of this evaluation rubric, “assessments” include either direct or indirect assessments of student learning outcomes. A summary of the analysis of the quality of assessments and outcomes by dimension is provided below:

- **Comprehensive Domain:** Nearly all the programs met this criterion. The three that did not neglected to report on their masters and/or doctoral programs.

- **Guidelines Domain:** Though every program reported some kind of student learning outcomes, only eight had learning outcomes for specific courses and/or levels and included direct as well as indirect measures. The remaining programs either listed only topics to be covered, or reported limited direct or (more commonly) indirect measures of student learning outcomes.

- **Responsibility Domain:** About one-third of the programs failed to indicate who took responsibility for designing, administering, scoring, and reporting assessment results. Of the programs that delegated responsibility, five suggested that the burden of assessment was adequately distributed, and five revealed that one or a few faculty members do the “lion’s share” of the assessment work. Fortunately, none of these programs appeared to be inappropriately delegating assessment responsibilities.

- **Timetables Domain:** For a little over half of the programs, the assessment timetables appeared to be either “quick” or “reasonable.” Two programs had six-year cycles, which may be too long to be useful, and four failed to report clear timetables.

- **Investment Domain:** The adequacy of institutional resources for assessment was the most under-reported feature. Over half of the programs reviewed did not discuss it at all. The remaining programs either implied that investment in assessment was adequate, or revealed that assessment occurred in spite of inadequate resources.

- **Practical but Useful Domain:** This criterion was difficult to judge because the review documents (e.g., annual assessment activity reports) did not provide details regarding the actual assessments used. (Consequently, concerning this domain, conclusions should be considered tentative.) Eight of the programs appeared to rely on feasible, useful assessments. Three of them relied on assessments that are valued but challenging to implement. One program admitted that one of its valued assessments – portfolios – was not feasible as student enrollment increased. Four programs failed to indicate the practicality or usefulness of their assessments.
Evidence Domain: Only one program provided sufficient, convincing evidence of student achievement of both institutional and program-learning outcomes. Ten programs provided evidence for some, but not all outcomes. Common oversights included an overreliance on indirect measures, including alumni surveys, rather than direct measures of learning.

In summary, the review suggests that the programs are generally attempting to comply with both internal and external mandates to report on assessment processes, assessments, and outcomes, but several key areas are in need of improvement. Clearly, the University needs to define assessments and student learning outcomes and directly measure learning. Fortunately, there is evidence of progress in these areas (e.g., some programs have made significant improvements in reporting on student learning over the past three years). The tendency of programs to neglect institutional learning outcomes is understandable in light of the relative salience of the 10-year-old institutional goals and the lack of clarity concerning which University goal statements should be addressed—the 1998 Statement of Strategic Goals and Values or the 2006 Draft University Goals and Priorities. Nonetheless, if University-wide learning outcomes are to have meaning, they must be addressed in academic assessment plans. The lack of convincing evidence of student learning is in need of redress if the University is to improve the quality of education students receive. Finally, the University needs to assess whether the resources—namely, people, time and money—it dedicates to supporting schools and departments in their articulation of learning outcomes, measurements (direct and indirect) of learning, and uses of assessment data to improve programs, are sufficient or not. As part of that support assessment, the University should consider professional development training to increase the level of assessment-literacy among the faculty.

Regular Evaluation of Student Learning Assessment Processes

CAA reviews the academic assessment process with contributions from several members of the University (e.g., vice provost for Undergraduate Education, dean of Graduate Studies). CAA’s Program Review Committee and GEAC review academic programs and the General Education program, respectively. CAA can recommend changes in assessment policies and procedures. The Council as a whole meets at least once a month, often more, throughout the academic year and takes up issues as they arise. Its Program Review and GEACs meet multiple times each month as well. CAA not only engages in a periodic review, but has ongoing discussions among its members about how assessment processes, assessment, and outcomes should be improved.

Administrative Support for Improvements in Assessment and Student Learning

When deficiencies in student learning are uncovered, the Interim Director of Program Review and Assessment informs the program’s faculty and provides substantive feedback about the areas requiring immediate attention. Additionally, CAA contacts the department chair and/or program director and provides feedback about troublesome areas. It may also recommend that individual instructors contact ITLAL to discuss the areas of concern and potential solutions for improving them. For example, University feedback on the 2006-2007 annual assessment activity reports
encouraged several departments to contact the director of ITLAL to obtain help on sharpening the measures of the objectives and on developing methods to better measure the objectives.

ITLAL provides a wide array of services to UAlbany’s faculty, offering them help if they need to improve their classroom assessment techniques or establish a clearer set of learning objectives for their courses. ITLAL is an invaluable resource for helping individual departments improve and sharpen their learning objectives, as well as detecting and correcting pedagogical problems. The University also supports other departments that deal with the deficiencies in student learning, such as the Office of Academic Support Services and the Writing Center.

A decade ago, the Trustees of the State University of New York mandated system-wide General Education requirements; they were implemented in 2000. The Trustees then mandated assessment of student learning outcomes. Initially, the Undergraduate Academic Council’s Subcommittee on General Education Assessment, which was later moved to CAA, reviewed the General Education program, and found that students have continually met the program’s learning objectives since its assessment began in 2002-03. Consistent with UAlbany’s General Education Assessment Plan, evidence of student learning consists of data collected on student learning activities, which are designed to capture the General Education learning objectives, syllabi analyses, and student self-perception surveys.

The campus submits annual General Education reports to SUNY system administration that summarize its student achievement levels from course-embedded assessments. If the reports reveal that students are falling below University-set standards, the University would need to make corrective changes to its General Education program. An overwhelming majority of UAlbany students meet or exceed these standards. The system-wide General Education requirements, in some areas (e.g., mathematics) are below the level one would expect of UAlbany students.

The University has more data on student attitudes than on student learning. In most disciplines, there are neither standardized national exams nor an agreed-upon undergraduate curriculum. The University relies on other objective indicators of program quality (e.g., number of students who pursue graduate studies, success in securing employment, and performance in capstone courses) and on indirect self-reported measures of student learning. Students rate courses and instructors as “very effective,” “effective,” “moderately effective,” “ineffective,” or “very ineffective.”

As noted in the chapter section on Institutional Effectiveness, the campus conducts triennial student opinion surveys, and in 2008 it participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for the first time. The NSSE results were shared with deans and chairs, and by them with their faculties. The results of the 2008 NSSE survey administration are being considered at this writing, in conjunction with the First-Year Experience Taskforce and the Writing Panel report to develop initiatives to bolster the undergraduate experience.

During years when budgets are not being reduced, departmental allocations (e.g., replacing retirees, teaching assistantships, adjunct positions, office staff support) are driven by myriad considerations other than course quality, as determined by measurements of student learning.
Course demand – supplying enough seats for enrolled students – is usually a more immediate priority than course quality. Assessments of student learning do not drive budget allocations or course offerings, but nonetheless do have a longer-term goal of improving course quality.

The University regularly gauges students’ opinions on instructor evaluation forms to identify weak courses and/or poor instructors, and to ensure student satisfaction with the instruction they receive. The University also monitors more general student satisfaction with courses and other aspects of the academic (and non-academic) environment in its triennial Student Opinion Survey (SOS). Campus strategies for recruiting students, and for other initiatives – including strengthening advising and improving course availability, rest appreciably on information from this and other survey efforts.

It is difficult to know the degree to which academic assessments influence campus policies and individual departments. School/college and departmental assessment reports detail to some degree how assessments of student learning are being conducted, but the integration of these assessments with formal academic planning processes is nascent. Many issues addressed in departmental assessments are factored into the administration’s view and treatment of individual departments. The data that may play the biggest role (e.g., outside funding, faculty publications, demand for courses, numbers of low enrollment courses, and general level of student satisfaction with courses and instructors) are available from the University and do not require departmental assessments. The latter, because they are so detailed, are most valuable as instruments to guide a department’s internal reflections.

**Institutional Use of Student Learning Assessment Information**

The University has undertaken a number of initiatives to assess multiple aspects of students’ academic and non-academic experiences. Every three years, UAlbany administers an SOS, a practice which began in 1980; the last published report was issued in 2009, following a spring 2009 survey administration. These particular survey data are self-reported. Their primary value is for tracking almost three decades of changes in student perceptions about their UAlbany educations.

In 2005, a subcommittee of the University Senate reanalyzed the spring 2003 SOS data, conducted a follow-up survey, and made a number of recommendations to improve specific aspects of student-faculty interaction and the teaching effectiveness of instructors. The subcommittee’s study stimulated discussions among faculty, but the report did not lead to formal recommendations from the Senate.

In the springs of 2005, 2006, and 2007, UAlbany administered an internally developed instrument, the Student Experience Survey, which relies on self-reported data for learning. The University assembled the data comparing individual departments and programs, and it shared information about best practices originating from the departments whose students were most satisfied with course experiences and academic advisement.
Responding to concern among faculty with student writing, a Blue Ribbon Writing Panel was created in 2006. This panel identified significant weaknesses in the campus’s approach to writing instruction and recommended changes whose estimated annual cost would be about $422,000.4 Whether or not the University can implement the panel’s recommendations, given current budgetary constraints remains to be seen, and they remain on the provost’s desk at this writing.

Currently, the University is studying the First-Year Experience, including Project Renaissance, which seeks to create a small-college and community living atmosphere, along with an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum. Initially funded partly by an outside grant, Project Renaissance now relies on non-tenure track faculty. While the student life aspects of this program are widely viewed as successful (confirmed both by student surveys and retention data), concern among faculty over its academic aspects was one of several motivations that gave rise to the study, conducted during summer and fall 2008.

A recent survey of 2007 bachelor’s degree recipients found that a majority secured employment within one year of graduation and almost all of the remaining degree recipients were continuing their studies. The survey showed that 86% of UAlbany’s graduates remained in New York State and 84% of those who were continuing their studies were doing so at New York institutions. A spring 2008 survey-based study of present graduate students examined issues ranging from their satisfaction with academic program to student life (extra-curricular) and financial issues. The survey’s results were made publicly available on the Assessment Report Webpage of IRPE5, and program-specific results were provided to the programs’ respective chairs, directors, and deans.

The University’s efforts to assess student learning suggest a number of recommendations, which are listed in Appendix 5.1:

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APPENDICES

Appendix 5.1 Summary of Recommendations

- To promote more information sharing of assessment data and information, the University should develop a formal policy and set of procedures that promote the proactive and open sharing of assessment information to both internal and external stakeholders.

- UAlbany should continue to enhance the processes associated with academic assessment while increasing efforts towards more systemic and sustained assessment processes for administrative units.

- The provost’s Assessment Advisory Committee should be reconvened as a means of engaging and better coordinating academic and non-academic units, University governance, and administration in the timely sharing of assessment information.

- Much like the academic units, “assessment coordinators” should be assigned at the unit and divisional levels to facilitate assessment activities in each vice presidential area.

- To distribute assessment best practices that emerge in the academic units, the University needs to develop a mechanism for quickly sharing those best practices.

- The following five recommendations pertain to the specific content that academic program review self-studies should contain; each academic program self-study should:
  - Always include the current vitae of all program faculty as part of its assessment plan
  - Explain precisely how student advisement works, with special attention to its impact on the sequence of coursework and program goals
  - Include content on the out-of-class experiences for students
  - Consistently provide detailed comments about available support, resources and facilities, with recommendations for improvement
  - Include timetables for implementing plans related to the conclusions of the assessment process.

- To improve the quality of assessments, the University needs to better articulate practical assessments and student learning outcomes and directly – rather than indirectly – measure learning.

- To have standard assessment procedures attached to the institutional mission, the University should collectively create outcomes that are common across academic disciplines and which encourage academic units to align with those outcomes, while also adding discipline-specific outcomes to individual assessment programs.
• UAlbany should evaluate the adequacy of resources that support assessment processes in the schools and colleges.
• To connect assessment data and program improvement, the University needs to extend its support to academic programs and departments so that assessment experts can guide faculty in addressing needed areas of improvement.
Appendix 5.2 Sample Assessment Forms 1 and 2


The length of these documents precludes including them in this appendix.

Appendix 5.3: Academic Programs Reviewed

Chemistry       Music
Biology         Anthropology/Human Biology
Public Policy    Educational Administration and Policy Studies
Sociology       Criminal Justice
Psychology      Masters of Social Work
Russian         Masters in Regional Planning
East Asian Studies Information Science/MSIS
Art History     School of Business
## Appendix 5.4 Assessment Plan Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Clearly stated mission that adheres to the mission of the University</td>
<td>Mission statement is not compatible with program operation; relationship to University mission statement is absent or not compatible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Outcomes are detailed, substantive, and reflective of program mission; stated learning outcomes are measurable</td>
<td>Outcomes are not reflective of student learning; outcomes are not observable and not able to be adequately assessed as written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Design</td>
<td>Program is described in detail; course structure and rationale of sequencing is clear and consistent; advisement procedures are described and quality of advisement is reviewed or assessed</td>
<td>Consistent information is available in the graduate bulletin and website; no description provided of how advisement is provided or assessed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Quality</td>
<td>Clearly describes academic opportunities for students in the program; program offers substantial out-of-class experiences to enhance classroom learning</td>
<td>Does not describe program opportunities in the program; it is not clear what students can do outside of taking classes to meet program mission and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Quality</td>
<td>Faculty vitae are current; narrative describes recent research, teaching, and scholarship to promote program mission</td>
<td>Faculty vitae not complete or outdated; incomplete narrative describing faculty scholarship and teaching; document suggests a lack of current scholarly activity among the faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Plan</td>
<td>Detailed plan to directly and indirectly assess student learning outcomes; includes rigorous qualitative and quantitative methods; describes how information obtained will be used to improve the program</td>
<td>Assessment plan does not assess student outcomes; plan does not include a timetable for continuous assessment initiatives or how assessment data will be used to improve the program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Support, Resources, and Facilities

| Tables accurately reflect the past five years and the section supplements the tables with a descriptive interpretation of the data presented |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Incomplete information on support, resources and facilities over the last five years; missing important information (e.g., library holdings) |

### Conclusions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forward thinking based vision for the next five years is clearly stated; demonstrates intention to use results of self-study data to plan for the future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describes a survival mode; does not make reasonable five year goals; program does not articulate steps to meet those goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 5.5 List of Syllabi Reviewed for Student Learning Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalog Numbers</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
<th>Sections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAAS311Z</td>
<td>Hist Slavery West Hemisphere</td>
<td>7855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AANT319</td>
<td>Physical Growth/Development</td>
<td>9294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AANT341</td>
<td>Ethnology of Mesoamerica</td>
<td>1070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AANT422</td>
<td>Advanced Phonology</td>
<td>6828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AART520A</td>
<td>Sculpture III</td>
<td>1297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AATM107</td>
<td>The Oceans</td>
<td>9231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AATM699</td>
<td>Research I</td>
<td>1421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABIO110</td>
<td>General Biology I</td>
<td>1508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABIO205</td>
<td>Human Genetics</td>
<td>6235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABIO341</td>
<td>Neurobiology</td>
<td>1542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACHM121</td>
<td>General Chemistry II</td>
<td>1719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACHM124</td>
<td>General Chemistry Laboratory I</td>
<td>1726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACOM465</td>
<td>Studies Communication Theory</td>
<td>9102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACOM697A</td>
<td>Guided Research Project</td>
<td>9500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AECO110</td>
<td>Prin Eco I: Microeconomics</td>
<td>6944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AENG226</td>
<td>Focus-Lit Theme, Form, or Mode</td>
<td>6533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AENG310</td>
<td>Read &amp; Interpret Eng Studies</td>
<td>7004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHIS101</td>
<td>Amer Political+Social Hist II</td>
<td>9208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJRL100</td>
<td>Found. Journ. &amp; Media Studies</td>
<td>7220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJRL385</td>
<td>Broadcast Journalism</td>
<td>6932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJST499</td>
<td>Topics in Judaic Studies</td>
<td>8837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMAT106</td>
<td>Survey of Calculus</td>
<td>9395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMAT413</td>
<td>Advanced Calculus I</td>
<td>2541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMUS218</td>
<td>Special Topics in Music</td>
<td>9006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APHI115Y</td>
<td>Moral Choices</td>
<td>9557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASOC575</td>
<td>Ethnicity and Race</td>
<td>8914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATHR202</td>
<td>Prod Pract 2A</td>
<td>3484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWSS310</td>
<td>Intro to Feminist Pedagogy</td>
<td>3511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACC644</td>
<td>Taxation of Estates &amp; Trusts</td>
<td>3571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITM513</td>
<td>Quantitative Analysis for Bus</td>
<td>6882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNSE696</td>
<td>Intro to Res Prob II</td>
<td>8179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPSY420</td>
<td>Child and Adolescent Developmt</td>
<td>3723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPSY530</td>
<td>Statistical Methods I</td>
<td>6612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPSY623</td>
<td>Adv Developmental Psychology</td>
<td>3738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERDG655</td>
<td>Emergent Literacy</td>
<td>9094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEPi610</td>
<td>AIDS Epidemiology</td>
<td>3943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICSI550</td>
<td>Information Retrieval</td>
<td>6799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIST655</td>
<td>Rare Books</td>
<td>6796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCRJ202</td>
<td>Intro to Law &amp; Crimnl Justice</td>
<td>7884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPAD663</td>
<td>Comparative Policy Systems</td>
<td>5853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPOS103</td>
<td>Political Theory</td>
<td>7000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPOS525Q</td>
<td>Feminist Thought &amp; Public Poli</td>
<td>6109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSSW650</td>
<td>Field Instruction I</td>
<td>4594</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 5.6 Assessment of Student Learning Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Exemplary</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Inadequate</th>
<th>Unavailable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>The assessment plans comprehensively address each academic level (undergraduate, MS/MA, PhD) and major.</td>
<td>The plan addresses the levels and majors together, without making distinctions between them.</td>
<td>The plan neglects one or more levels or majors.</td>
<td>Not specified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidelines</td>
<td>The assessments have clear, realistic guidelines, which include learning outcomes for specific courses and/or levels that align with corresponding mission statements. Assessments align with outcomes and include appropriate direct as well as indirect measures.*</td>
<td>The plan lists a combination of topics/courses and outcomes that are related to the mission. Assessments relate to topics and outcomes and include direct and indirect measures.</td>
<td>The plan does not clearly identify learning outcomes and include only limited direct or indirect measures.</td>
<td>Not addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>The plan identifies a variety of appropriate individuals or groups who are assigned responsibility for designing, administering, scoring and reporting assessment results</td>
<td>The burden of assessment is carried by one or a few faculty members</td>
<td>Assessment duties are assigned inappropriately (e.g., to students)</td>
<td>Not specified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetables</td>
<td>The administration, scoring and reporting of assessments is done</td>
<td>Timetables for the administration, scoring and reporting of assessments are</td>
<td>Timetables are not specified.</td>
<td>Not specified.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Middle States Self-Study — Chapter 5: Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment of Student Learning

**Domain** | **Exemplary** | **Adequate** | **Inadequate** | **Unavailable**
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Investment | The administration, scoring and reporting of assessments are adequately supported by institutional resources. | Assessment happens in spite of inadequate investment. | Assessment is deficient because of inadequate investment. | Not addressed. |
Practical but useful | Assessments are feasible but detailed and valued enough by the faculty to be sustainable and useful. | Assessments are valued but challenging to implement. | Assessments are not feasible and not valued. | Not addressed. |
Evidence | Assessment results provide sufficient, convincing evidence of student achievement of institutional and program learning outcomes. | The assessment plan provides evidence of student achievement of some but not all outcomes. | The assessment plan presents evidence of student failure. | The assessment plan presents insufficient evidence of student achievement. |

*Direct Assessment of Learning Outcomes* (Practitioner’s Guide to Program Review, p. 48)

- Student work in capstone courses
- Student portfolios
- ETS/GRE items
- Pre-test, post-test program exams
- Licensure exam items
- Performances and presentations
- Comprehensive examinations
Master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation **Indirect Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

- **A)** Surveys of students in their graduating year/semester, including the Student Experience Survey administered by Institutional Research
- **B)** Focus groups or interviews with undergraduate/graduate students
- **C)** Alumni surveys
- **D)** Alumni placements in graduate school/career (if stated as learning outcome)
- **E)** Employer surveys