March 26, 2004

TO: Members of the Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education

FROM: Jack R. Warner

RE: Approval of Systemwide Student Outcomes Assessment

Motion

It is recommended that –

- The Board of Governors for Higher Education charge CCRI, RIC and URI with engaging in institution-wide student outcomes assessment that begins with work in science and in English skills (writing/composition, communication and reading), moves on to add all disciplines (beginning with mathematics), and concludes as soon as possible but no later than fall 2008.

- The committee recommends that the board further charge the presidents or their designees with presenting at the board's September 2004 meeting their institutional timelines for completion of their campuswide undertaking of student outcomes assessment. The timelines should specify the beginning and completion dates for identification of student outcomes and appropriate assessment measures for each campus program, including interdisciplinary programs such as general education. In keeping with the jurisdiction of the board (RI General Laws: 16-59), the campuses will be free to organize and undertake their work plans as they see fit, as long as their plans result in clearly stated, measurable student outcomes and appropriate assessments for each program (and courses within the program) according to the multi-year timeline established by each institution.

- Each spring, the board review progress made toward completion of the above stated systemwide effort.

The Academic and Student Affairs Committee approved the above recommendation at its meeting on 3/26/04.

Background

Why is Outcomes Assessment Necessary to Furthering Learning, Advanced Degree Attainment, and Successful Job Placement?

Meeting Information-Age Requirements:
Commissioner Warner often speaks of the difference between higher education in the Industrial Age (when higher education screened students out and focused on preparing only an elite group of leaders) and the current Information Age (when higher education must not only develop future leaders but also educate and train the general populace to ready them for jobs that require – at a minimum -- some postsecondary training). Student outcomes ensure that students who complete a program of study are equipped for the Information Age with a set of measurable skills and knowledge related to areas such as critical thinking, literacy and communication (including the use of technology), collaborative problem-solving and decision-making, numerical and scientific reasoning, computer fluency and use of technology, subject-matter knowledge, an understanding of organizational and societal systems, and personal qualities (such as individual and social responsibility, integrity, ethics, relationship-building, teamwork, creativity, enthusiasm, assertiveness, initiative, independent learning, and self-management).

Transfer:
In order to enhance transfer of courses from institution to institution, faculty from different institutions must be able to move beyond sharing with each other course titles and descriptions to being able to talk about what they can ensure a student will know and be able to do at the end of a course and at the end of a program. In other words, RIC or URI will be more likely to accept CCRI's Course #1228 or a program (a coherent set of courses) if CCRI can articulate exactly what students know and are able to do after completion of that course and if that set of skills and knowledge matches the stated student outcomes for a course at RIC or URI, even if the course titles and descriptions differ.

PK-16 Alignment:
In addition to facilitating decision-making regarding inter-institutional transfer, student outcomes assessment is important to aligning the exit requirements from high school to college. The Rhode Island Department of Education is ahead of higher education in its efforts to determine competencies. For example, they have drafted most of a K-12 set of mathematical standards (which consists of mathematical concepts that students must know at a specified level of proficiency to exit from one grade to the next). RIOHE's PK-16 initiative for 2004-2005 aims to ensure alignment of these drafts of high school exit standards in mathematics, reading and writing with the entrance expectations in public higher education. In order to undertake this work effectively, an understanding of the language and process of student outcomes assessment will be important for higher education faculty who need to express their expectations for entering freshmen to their PK-12 counterparts. Ultimately, of course, improved alignment between high school exit and college entrance standards is likely to result in less need for postsecondary remediation and a quicker route to the baccalaureate degree.

Advantages for Students, their Faculty, and the Public:
Most importantly, though, student outcomes assessment will clarify for students and for the public exactly what students will know and be able to do upon graduation. Faculty (who may have reluctantly undertaken the work associated with revamping a classroom to make it centered on the learner and his/her outcomes rather than professor and information provided as an input) often report that they are amazed at how the change affects students. Students who are told what skills and knowledge they will gain from a course and a set of courses comprising a minor or major are, in turn, able to articulate to graduate schools and to future employers what they know and are able to do. Students are empowered by being able to express exactly what they bring to a graduate program or to a new job. Faculty also often report their excitement over the new focus on the student as a learner who strives to develop not only in the classroom guided by the professor as the "sage on the stage with chalk in hand," but also outside the classroom as an independent learner. Finally, faculty can use the data gathered through outcomes assessment not only as feedback for students but also as a means to trumpet the successes of their programs and to make periodic improvements in a timely way.

Exactly What is Outcomes Assessment and By What Process Do Faculty Undertake this Work?

All regional accrediting agencies require member institutions to assess intended student learning outcomes, a process by which departments determine the skills and knowledge that each student should possess at the completion of a course and at the program level after the completion of a coherent set of courses. In addition to determining necessary skills and knowledge, faculty engaging in outcomes assessment must also determine standards for success; in other words, at what level must students be proficient by the time a course or program is completed? After determining standards, the appropriate assessments are selected to measure whether or not students have achieved the standards for proficiency in the various skills and knowledge. For example, perhaps a student who graduates from a technical program needs to be able to write technical reports proficiently (a skill). The faculty would then need to set a standard based on what they mean by the term *proficient* and then select a measurement, perhaps a writing sample, used for the student to demonstrate the clearly stated expectations of proficiency in this particular skill. That same student might within his/her technical program need to know how a particular common technical process works (knowledge).

Arriving at agreement regarding such matters is usually not as simple. Work on outcomes assessment commonly begins at the mega-level when an institution decides on its definition of the educated person (what should the graduate of an institution know and be able to do?) and reconsiders its institutional mission in light of that definition. The work then filters down to the college/school and departmental levels, where faculty and administrators consider first the mission, goals and measurable objectives of the college/school, then the individual departments, and, finally, the programs. Once faculty are clear about the goals and (measurable) objectives of a program, then they examine the individual courses. In combination as a major, minor or concentration, these courses educate the student to know and be able to do whatever is deemed by the faculty to be

appropriate for a student who completes a particular program of study. Sometimes a particular set of skills and knowledge are taught in a particular course, or sometimes – often in the case of writing skills – the skill is developed across a series of courses in a program.

Selecting the Right Assessment to Judge Whether Students Have Acquired a Particular Skill or Knowledge

When a program's set of skills and knowledge are hammered out to the faculty's satisfaction (which is not an easy process), then faculty must determine various assessments to measure whether or not students are able to demonstrate an appropriate level of competency. Tests are one possible assessment tool, but assessment plans usually include criterion-referenced measurements and provide a student with multiple opportunities to succeed. The following measures are common criterion-referenced indicators of quality student outcomes: employment and wage tracking, performance in graduate school, pass rates on licensure exams, portfolio assessment, performance in a capstone experience, data on satisfaction (of students, alumni, parents or employers regarding programs), assessment of content knowledge in the major or minor, and value-added assessments.

Do Models Exist for Such Work?

Examples of outcomes assessment are readily available on many Web sites (including a pilot Web site being developed by the NEASC [http://209.113.248.220/assessment/index.htm] and a long-standing Web site developed by Peggy Maki at AAHE [http://www.aahe.org/assessment/assessmentplan.htm]). In addition, information, including a specific example of curriculum planning, at Middlesex Community College is attached (attachment a). Also, a discussion of planning developed by the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences at California State University, Chico is attached (b).

What Is the Practice in Rhode Island?

Here in Rhode Island, departments (most commonly departments located in professional schools) at URI, RIC and CCRI are already practicing student outcomes assessment, but the practice could not be described as widespread. In general, departments whose programs are accredited by a professional association are required by that association to assess student outcomes (for example, engineering programs accredited by ABET or business programs accredited by AACSB). Institutions are also required by the NEASC, New England's regional accrediting association, to engage in student outcomes assessment, but the association has not withheld accreditation when institutions have been slow to respond fully (the NEASC policy is included as attachment 0c).

At conferences focused on student outcomes assessment that were sponsored by RIOHE in 2001 and 2002, faculty listened to outside assessment experts and taught each other through showcase presentations of their work in the area of student outcomes assessment.

Some presentations demonstrated fine work. The outcome, though, was not much discernable change in other departments that had not undertaken this very rigorous exercise.

In a Nutshell, What Can the System Acccomplish Through Outcomes Assessment?

In summary, outcomes assessment -- with its focus on the student and his/her development of specific skills and knowledge – identifies what a graduate should know and be able to do and how to measure his/her proficiency. A functioning system of student outcomes assessment also uses the data: faculty give their students feedback regarding their proficiency, and departments can use the data, especially trends in the data to improve their programs, transfer of their programs, and alignment with PK-12 exit standards. The systemwide charge recommended to the ASAC is intended to ensure that the programmatic offerings at URI, RIC and CCRI consistently offer the student learner and the public this assurance of quality.

Attachment: examples