

## IWU's Assessment Plan: Brief History and Summary of Conceptual Framework

Revised: September 26, 2006

In 1989 the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (now the Higher Learning Commission) of the North Central Association (NCA) of Colleges and Schools issued a statement that mandated the assessment of student academic achievement. In this statement, and in its subsequent 1996 statement on assessment, the NCA provided no prescription or endorsement of a specific approach. Indeed, the 1989 statement stated explicitly that each institution should develop an assessment plan that reflects its "purposes, resources, and commitments."

As part of IWU's 1991-93 preparation for a continuing accreditation visit by the NCA, the IWU faculty first began to think about the criteria that should govern our initial assessment plan. The faculty began its task with the belief that the plan must reflect who the IWU community is and what the University represents; that is, the assessment plan must be intimately tied to IWU's mission. Although the University's mission statement has changed since that time, the belief that assessment must be mission-driven has not.

IWU's current mission statement, adopted in October 2003, holds that:

A liberal education at Illinois Wesleyan fosters creativity, critical thinking, effective communication, strength of character and a spirit of inquiry; it deepens the specialized knowledge of a discipline with a comprehensive world view. It affords the greatest possibilities for realizing individual potential while preparing students for democratic citizenship and life in a global society. As the University pursues this ideal for all its students, it helps students to follow a wide range of career and life paths, offering diverse curricula in liberal arts, fine arts and professional programs as well as opportunities for interdisciplinary study and off-campus learning. The University through its policies, programs and practices is committed to diversity, social justice and environmental sustainability. A tightly knit, supportive university community, together with a variety of opportunities for close interaction with excellent faculty, both challenges and supports students in their personal and intellectual development.

As did the mission statement at the time IWU's original assessment plan was adopted, IWU's current mission statement implies that faculty should assess student achievement in intellectual skills, including writing and quantitative skills as foundations of critical thinking, as well as competence in a major discipline. It also implies that assessment efforts must be directed at understanding the effect of an IWU education on a student's values and cultural awareness. These implications shaped IWU's initial assessment plan in the early 1990s; they continue to shape what is assessed more than a decade later.

When IWU's assessment plan was first developed, a faculty committee used several additional principles as guides, deriving the principles from an analysis of departmental questionnaires, an examination of the assessment plans of other universities, and a review of the assessment literature available at that time. These principles, which the IWU community continues to recognize, are summarized as follows:

- **Authentic Outcomes Assessment:** An assessment plan must be valid; that is, it must employ accurate indicators of achievement.
- **Effectiveness:** An assessment plan must make effective use of University resources. It must be cost-effective, and it must not place an undue burden on the faculty.
- **Faculty Control:** The locus of control for the assessment process lies in the faculty. Therefore, the Academic Standards Committee (ASC) of the Curriculum Council should be responsible for the ongoing assessment of General Education achievement. This committee's role is not one of information-gathering. Much of the information can be collected by the administration. Rather, this committee should evaluate the information and make recommendations that can be incorporated

into the curriculum. It also should evaluate the assessment process, and make recommendations for revision of the assessment plan.

- **Implementation of Findings:** The fruits of the assessment process should be manifest in curricular and other program or policy changes. Accordingly, ASC, along with department and program faculty, should evaluate the information and make recommendations that can be incorporated into the curriculum. Budget and planning processes should be able to accommodate resource needs that arise from assessment findings. The results of assessment should ultimately be documented and visible over time, to students as well as to faculty and staff.
- **Plan Review and Revision:** Assessment is an on-going process, and the group that developed IWU's initial plan was clear that it was to be viewed as a starting point rather than a finished product. The plan was expected to change, and has changed, as the University changes and faculty and staff learn from the assessment process. This process of review and revision will undoubtedly continue. As part of IWU's most recent NCA self-study, in fact, both the 2001-03 Steering Committee and the ASC conducted a thorough review of the complete policy and set of indicators and made changes as dictated by the review. Since then, the University Assessment Officer has made editorial changes reflecting a new mission statement and updating the list of assessment instruments used.

### **Overall Components of the Assessment Plan**

Taken together, the principles articulated above resulted in a schedule of assessment activities that has been modified over the years based on changes in IWU's calendar and General Education program and on experience with assessment indicators suggested in the initial plan. The full written plan currently in use, with an explanation and rationale for indicators and times for collecting and summarizing data, is available as a separate document. An Assessment Indicator Matrix, which classifies all current indicators by type and time administered, is provided as an attachment to this summary.

### **Assessment of Major Programs**

Initial discussion of major program assessment at IWU was guided by beliefs in departmental autonomy and the expertise of departments in assessing achievement within their fields of study. Thus, the original assessment plan recommended that each department develop assessment instruments that fit its needs. This recommendation is the basis for current practices that govern assessment at the department/program level. A matrix summarizing assessment methods used across the campus is provided as a second attachment to this document.

### **Examples of Curricular/Program Change as a Result of Assessment**

Selected examples of curricular or other changes as a result of IWU's assessment activities are provided here. Other examples of the uses of assessment information can be found in departmental and other assessment reports.

#### General Education Assessment

- Three times since the introduction of the current General Education program, the Curriculum Council has appointed task forces to review concerns about particular course categories in the General Education program. In 1990-2000, this process resulted in revisions to the description, goals, and criteria for the Analysis of Values category. In 2000-01, the same process resulted in a decision not to revise goals and criteria for the Natural Sciences category. Study of the Gateway Colloquium program is ongoing as of 2006-07.
- ASC thoroughly discussed the faculty readers' reports on portfolios of student work in General Education collected from 1996 through 2003. Its major action stemming from the readers' reports was to appoint a task force to evaluate the Gateway Colloquium program comprehensively, starting in Summer 2002. The task force made its final report to the Curriculum Council in 2002-03, and the 2003-04 CC

addressed the task force's recommendations, particularly with respect to collecting and evaluating portfolios of student writing. Further discussion of the program and a proposal to improve staffing of the program were considered in 2005-06. Faculty action on a CC proposal to revise the composition of and collection methods for student portfolios for assessment purposes is anticipated in 2006-07.

- The *General Education Handbook* issued to each student when s/he enters is revised each summer, based in part on suggestions from students in assessment focus groups.

#### Department/Program Assessment

- The Economics Department altered the structure of assignments in its senior seminar course, which requires original empirical research, so that students can integrate their research findings into the literature of the discipline more effectively. This change was made after a criteria-based review of seminar papers over several years and discussion among department faculty about how best to address systematic deficiencies.
- The School of Art introduced an expanded senior critique opportunity in addition to the customary senior exhibition that is a part of all graduates' experience. Students must apply for acceptance into the senior critique program and subject their work to rigorous faculty evaluation in hopes of achieving Exhibition Honors, which are given to no more than 5% of students in the School.
- The Philosophy Department has used exit interviews, senior portfolios evaluated by an external reviewer, and surveys of students' future plans to assess student achievement. The faculty learned over time that students' biggest need was more electives but recognized that the department's small size and its General Education responsibilities made it unlikely that many new courses could be added in the near term. Through creative use of adjuncts in May Term and cross-listing or other types of interdepartmental cooperation (notably, with Religion and Mathematics/Computer Science), philosophy majors and minors now enjoy access to courses including Philosophy of Feminism, Continental Philosophy, Critical Theory, and Advanced Logic.
- The International Studies program added a senior seminar as a result of students' disappointment with the prior practice of having an independent study as their capstone experience. In addition, the Director of International Studies successfully led other faculty members in persuading the Provost to create a full-time Study Abroad Office (now International Office). Since most International Studies concentrations require study outside the United States, the faculty believe that this change has resulted in better preparation and re-entry experiences for students.

#### **Responsibility for Assessment Activities**

The Academic Standards Committee of the Curriculum Council is the primary elected faculty body with responsibility for assessment activities. As noted, this committee has been actively involved in assessment since the mid-1990s and has been particularly active in reviewing assessment results and recommending curricular review and change since the current General Education Program has been in effect. In 2004-05, recognizing the growing importance of assessment, ASC appointed an Ad Hoc Assessment Task Force of faculty and staff members. Since then, that group has met regularly, organized panel discussions of selected assessment results, made presentations to advisors, and conducted a series of in-depth interviews with individual students to explore the results of previous assessment activities.

After a three-year experiment with assigning faculty members release time to implement the program, administrative responsibility for assessment was assigned as one of the duties of the Associate Dean of the Faculty, where it remained for six years. During that time, the Associate Dean worked closely with the Dean of Students and other student affairs officers on aspects of assessment that extend beyond academic issues. In that capacity, the Associate Dean developed processes such as (a) meeting with new students participating in the General Education portfolio process each year; (b) administering 2-3 national or in-house survey instruments annually; (c) providing logistical support as needed for the faculty readers of General Education portfolios; (d) monitoring the assessment activities of departments and calling for periodic formal reports of these activities; (e) meeting with the Academic Standards Committee to discuss

assessment as a whole and the General Education portfolio process in particular; and (f) disseminating assessment information to various campus groups as appropriate and available.

Starting in 2002-03, those same administrative responsibilities for assessment were lodged with a Special Assistant to the President, who also has responsibility for planning and institutional research. In 2005-06, the title of the position was changed to Director of Institutional Research and Planning, but responsibility for assessment activities was retained in the office. The Director continues to administer all assessment efforts, convenes the Ad Hoc Assessment Task Force, and meets with the Academic Standards Committee.