

Assessment Culture Matrix
Report of the Assessment Committee
June 2004

This report summarizes the discussion and analysis of the Assessment Committee of Calvin College concerning assessment. The report follows the Assessment Culture Matrix of the Higher Learning Commission.

The committee noted that on almost every dimension of evaluation, Calvin exhibits many of the characteristics of the “Making Progress” section of the matrix. In many cases, the institution is just beginning to move towards “Maturing Stages” descriptors although there are units (such as the departments with externally accredited programs) that exhibit many of the features of this level. In the following summary, we will not attempt to describe our progress against each of the characteristics, but rather we will list two or three of the characteristics (usually from “Making Progress”) that best describe our current situation and give evidence for that. In each section, we will also summarize our plans for improvement.

I. Institutional Culture

A. Collective/Shared Values

Making Progress

- A shared understanding of the purposes, advantages, and limitations of assessment exists and is broadening to include areas beyond the instructional division.
- Student learning and assessment of student academic achievement are valued across the institution, departments, and programs.
- Some but not all academic programs have developed statements of purpose and educational goals that reflect the institutional mission and specifically mention the department’s focus on improving student learning, and the importance they attribute to assessing student learning as a means to that end.
- Assessment of general education skills, competencies, and capacities is progressing but has not been fully implemented.

Evidence: There is absolutely no question that student learning is valued and drives decision-making and resource allocation. The goals of a Calvin education for students are documented in the *Expanded Statement of Mission* and there is a substantial agreement about the kind of graduate Calvin wants to produce. This shared understanding extends beyond the academic division to other units of the college. The student life division defines its goals in terms of student development and consistent with the educational goals of the institution. In fact the student life division partners with the academic division in a unique first-year program that has as part of its goal an orientation of students to the educational project of the college.

Almost every academic unit of the college as well as the student life division have statements of mission or educational goals consistent with those of the college. The value placed on student learning is particularly evident in the new general education (“core”) curriculum. The curriculum was developed only after a statement of student learning goals was developed. All course proposals for courses to be included in the new core curriculum had to document that these student learning outcomes were addressed in the course.

Acceptance of formal assessment efforts to measure progress against these educational goals has been slower. An assessment plan was adopted by the faculty in 1994 and many units have made assessment a routine part of their operations, but there are still academic departments and non-academic units that do not routinely collect data and have not really “signed on” to the assessment project. There are areas of notable success – assessment data was a critical component in driving the faculty to completely overhaul the “core” (general education) curriculum and the professional programs are noted for their assessment programs – but there are departments that still do not see the need for assessment and have made only minimal efforts to comply with the institutional requirements in this regard.

Plans for improvement: Two important assessment efforts currently underway should do much to develop a broader understanding in the campus community of the value of a strong assessment program. First, an assessment program for the core curriculum (currently entering its fourth year) is being developed and implemented. Since almost every academic department participates in and is dependent on the core curriculum, these assessment efforts will touch most faculty members (as well as the student life division). As data become available and begin to affect educational decisions concerning improvements of the core, faculty members should begin to see how assessment can be of value not only to the core but also to other parts of the curriculum. A second campus wide assessment effort just beginning is the development of assessment tools for programs that support the education program. The college offers majors and minors in almost every department that are taken by students presenting them for certification in either elementary or secondary education. In addition to departmentally developed objectives, these majors and minors conform to educational objectives developed by the State of Michigan Board of Education. It will be necessary over the next three years for departments to develop tools for assessing these programs to present to the state at our next periodic review.

Besides these two efforts, it will be important over the next few years for the director of assessment and the assessment committee to do considerably more “PR” for assessment than has been done in the past. The fact is that there is a lot of data that is useful to the college as a whole (for example, the NSSE data) and there a fair number of assessment success stories on campus. The director and the committee need to make these stories widely known. The committee also needs to be more

proactive in identifying key individuals in each department to work with in developing better assessment efforts.

B. Mission

Making Progress

- The institutional statements of Mission and Purposes or statements of educational goals indicate the value that the institution places upon student learning.

Maturing Stages

- Every academic program has a published statement of its purpose and educational goals, developed by the academic unit's faculty, which reflects the institution's Mission and Purpose statements, including those portions directly focused on assessing and improving student learning.
- The assessment program materials developed at the institutional level reflect the emphasis of the Mission and Purposes statements on the importance of identifying learning expectations, on determining the outcomes of assessing student learning across academic programs, and on using assessment results to improve student learning.

Evidence: The *Expanded Statement of Mission* clearly describes the educational mission of the institution. In a section entitled *Educational Goals* the mission statement outlines the knowledge, participation, competency, and commitment objectives of the educational programs. The recent (1999) revision of the core (general education) curriculum was guided by *An Engagement with God's World*, a document that describes the educational goals for the core in language parallel to and consistent with the *Expanded Statement of Mission*. Most statements of departmental goals draft off the mission. The Assessment Committee continues to use the goals described in the mission statement as an organizing framework for analyzing data and advising departments.

However the mission statement and departments are less clear about the need to assess outcomes against these objectives. While *An Engagement with God's World* included an outline of an assessment plan, the *Expanded Statement of Mission* is silent on the matter.

Plans for improvement: The goals and objectives of the mission statement and of the core curriculum proposal are widely known and there is broad agreement that they capture the essence of a Calvin education. However the goals in these two documents are many and they are described in language that often does not

immediately lead to describing assessable outcomes. An important goal for the core committee will be to develop shorter, more concrete statements of these goals together with tools for assessing these. Besides having immediate application in the assessment of the core curriculum, this will also lead to helping departments develop their own statements of outcomes for program-level goals.

II. Shared Responsibility

A. Faculty

Beginning Implementation

- Faculty and staff are questioning the efficacy of the assessment program, and their buy-in to date is minimal.
- Many programmatic or departmental faculty are not engaged in assessment activities that get to the core of measuring student learning outcomes.
- A substantial number of faculty members across the institution do not differentiate between grading in individual courses and the broader measurement of student outcomes across an academic program.

Making Progress

- Faculty in many departments have developed measurable objectives for each of the program's educational goals.
- The Faculty Senate, Assessment Committee and Curriculum Committee (Educational Policy Committee), other faculty bodies, and individual faculty leaders accept responsibility for becoming knowledgeable and remaining current in the field of assessment.
- Faculty members are learning the vocabulary and practices used in effective assessment activities and are increasingly contributing to assessment discussions and activities.
- Groups of faculty identified by the institution receive assessment reports and provide suggestions and recommendations to appropriate constituencies.

Maturing Stages

- Faculty members routinely collaborate to determine appropriate measures for publicly stated goals, objectives, and intended outcomes and to justify and recommend improvements based on corresponding results.
- Faculty members speak both publicly and privately in support of assessment.

Evidence: All faculty members understand the importance that the institution places on assessment of student learning. The committees of the institution directly associated with curricular development and evaluation (the Core Curriculum

Committee, the Educational Policy Committee, the Assessment Committee, and the Teacher Education Committee) are faculty committees and are now speaking with one voice on this matter. These committees routinely communicate the need for assessment and disseminate the results of assessment as appropriate. Thus it is clear that faculty leaders on curricular matters have identified assessment as essential. However the degree to which departments have moved towards acceptance of the language and practices of assessment varies widely by department and individual faculty members range from those committed to assessment in all their courses to those who instinctively bristle at any mention of the A word. While all departments have developed assessment plans, not all of these plans reflect a clear understanding of the difference between grading students in individual courses and assessing that the curriculum of the department is meeting its goals at the program level. Some faculty members, particularly in the humanities, are naturally resistant to “reducing” the educational process to a few easily measured outcomes. And many faculty members view assessment, even if they do it well, as an externally imposed (by the “administration”) mandate that does not yield significant payoffs for the department. To educate the faculty, the Assessment Committee has been meeting with individual departments over the last several years and there is some evidence that such meetings have had positive results.

Plan for improvement: The Assessment Committee will continue to meet with individual units to help them continue to implement and refine their assessment programs. Additionally, the committee needs to do more to communicate to the units how other units are doing. The decentralized approach to assessment that has characterized the past ten years has led to individual departments having to reinvent the wheel without many examples of what these wheels look like. While the committee does not want to mandate one model of assessment for all departments, more uniformity would probably help departments in their efforts.

B. Administration and Board

Making Progress

- The CAO has oversight responsibility for the ongoing operation of the assessment program and for promoting the use of assessment results to effect desired improvements in student learning, performance, development, and achievement.
- Deans, directors, and other academic officers demonstrate their commitment to the assessment program by informing senior administrators about assessment results and needs to make improvements in instruction, staffing, curriculum, and student and academic services.
- Unit heads devise strategies to ensure that their academic departments/programs implement the assessment plans they developed or develop them more fully.

Maturing Stages

- Senior administrators annually provide resources for the assessment program and provide additional resources necessary to enhance assessment practices and improve the faculty's understanding of assessment principles and use of assessment results.
- Senior administrators regularly provide resources for special projects to enhance the assessment program (e.g., pilot projects, summer stipends, departmental grants, and support for assessment symposia).

Evidence: The Provost (CAO) has identified the continued development of the assessment program as one of the top ten goals of the academic division in each of the last several years. For the past several years, the responsibility for overseeing that program had been delegated to the Dean for Instruction but in 2003, in an effort to provide more resources for this task, the Provost appointed a separate Director of Assessment (a .4 FTE position) to oversee these efforts. All department chairs and other unit heads understand their responsibility in ensuring that their departments fully implement their assessment plans and are required to report on their progress annually. The VP for Student Life is responsible for oversight of assessment efforts in that division and has recently devoted considerable effort and resources to systematizing the processes already in place for assessing the effectiveness of student life programs. The cabinet (the president and all vice presidents) takes an active interest in the assessment program – for example, they are presented with and discuss results of all-college assessment efforts such as the NSSE.

C. Students

Beginning Implementation

- Students know little or nothing about the assessment program. They do not understand how it will be carried out, their role in its success, or how it could be useful to them and future cohorts of students.

Evidence: There are student members of major college committees and these students do report on the activities of these committees to the Student Senate. And there is a considerable amount of orientation of students to the goals and objectives of a Calvin education (especially in the first-year Prelude program). But it is fair to say that students are informed regularly of assessment efforts only when they are asked directly to participate. Even then, students do not necessarily know the reasons for their participation in some exercises. An important exception to this rule is students in professional programs. Students in the education, engineering and nursing programs, for example, exhibit a high degree of awareness of the kinds of assessment activities that they are engaged in and

their purposes. Those students alone represent a sizable fraction of the student body.

Plans for improvement: As we continue to implement the new core curriculum assessment plan, it will be evident to students that a variety of assessment activities have special purposes. For example, courses in the integrative studies category of the core will play an important role in assessing global objectives of the core. As students engage in these activities, we will need to be more explicit about why they are being evaluated in a special way and what benefits there are to that.

III. Institutional Support

A. Resources

Making Progress

- The CEO and CAO annually negotiate a budget for the assessment program sufficient to provide the technological support, physical facilities, and space needed to sustain a viable assessment program and to make professional development opportunities available.
- Unit heads endorse the use of departmental funds for professional development in assessment, for faculty release time, and for other expenses associated with the department's assessment activities and initiatives based on assessment findings intended to improve student learning.
- Resources are made available to departments seeking to implement their assessment programs and to test changes intended to improve student learning.

Maturing Stages

- A budget line has been established and sufficient resources are allocated in the annual E & G operations budget to sustain a comprehensive assessment program.
- Funds are available and sufficient to support consultation, workshops, and professional development for faculty in the area of assessment of student learning.
- Individuals who have administrative assignments (including deans and department heads) are given the responsibility and authority to use budgeted resources to support academic changes based on assessment findings.

Evidence: At the institutional level, sufficient resources for the assessment program are made available by the CAO. While the assessment program does not have a separate departmental budget, funds are made available through the budgets controlled by the Provost, the Dean for Instruction, and the Director of Institutional Research. These funds provide for the conduct of all-college assessment efforts (such as participation in surveys), for the training of assessment officers (through

conference attendance and resources), and for the position of Director of Assessment. At the departmental level, assessment efforts are made a regular part of the department's resource allocation. Therefore faculty time is provided for by considering assessment coordination an important committee assignment in the department. Data collection efforts are coordinated by department administrative assistants. However many departments report that their assessment efforts are hampered by lack of resources. The most common request from departments is for more released time for faculty members to develop assessment tools and systems. This often does not reflect a lack of time but rather a statement about departmental priorities. Other departmental efforts are viewed as more worthy of limited faculty time.

Plan for improvement: The Director of Assessment will work more directly with departments to provide assistance in executing assessment efforts. A primary task in this regard is to coordinate the many surveys of students, current and former, that the institution conducts so that departments do not need to duplicate the efforts of other offices in selecting students, administering surveys, and compiling data.

B. Structures

Making Progress

- The assessment program is provided with a Coordinator/Director who reports directly to the CAO.
- The CEO or CAO has established a standing Assessment Committee, typically comprised of faculty, academic administrators, and representatives of the OIR and student government.
- Unit leaders (department heads) have responsibility for maintaining successful assessment programs as a part of their formal position description.
- Some or many academic units and the Curriculum Committee are requiring that faculty members indicate on the syllabi of previously approved courses and in the proposal for new courses and for new or revised programs the measurable objectives for student learning and how student learning will be assessed.
- Members of the Assessment Committee serve as coaches and facilitators to individuals and departments working to develop or improve their assessment programs and activities.

Maturing Stages

- The comprehensive assessment program is evaluated regularly and is modified as necessary for optimal effectiveness.
- The institution, through its organizational structure, provides financial resources and other support for all aspects of the assessment program,

including research and evaluation design, data collection and maintenance decision making, and consultation services.

- Academic unit heads report annually to the chief academic officer on accomplishments and challenges relating to the unit's assessment program.

Evidence: The assessment program is coordinated by the director of assessment and is supervised by the Assessment Committee, an all-college faculty committee. Assessment of the general education program is supervised by the Core Curriculum Committee. Beginning with the 2004-2005 academic year, the Director of Assessment position is a .40 FTE position. This is a considerable increase of resources as previously assessment was just one of many responsibilities of the Dean for Instruction. The director of assessment reports to the Provost, the CAO. The Assessment Committee reports to the Educational Policy Committee, the committee that is responsible for the supervision of the curriculum as a whole. Each member of the Assessment Committee is assigned as liaison to several departments and meets with representatives of those departments. At the department level, department chairs are responsible for the departmental components of the assessment program and report annually to the deans on assessment initiatives and results. EPC now requires all curricular proposals to include assessment evidence justifying the proposal. Also, all proposals are required to describe the means for assessing the efficacy of the changes proposed. An institutional research office with a full-time director also provides support for the assessment program, particularly in the conduct and analysis of all-college surveys and in the maintenance and distribution of important datasets.

Plan for improvement: The structures now in place are basically the right ones given the nature of Calvin as a faculty-governed institution. The lines of oversight and reporting are consistent with the way Calvin operates on other matters. However the committee structure is somewhat cumbersome and promotes a somewhat reactive mode of operation. It will be necessary in the next few years for the director of assessment to be more proactive in promoting assessment in the departments.

IV. Efficacy of Assessment

Making Progress

- Considerable program-level data about student and program performance are available, but individual units vary widely in the degree to which they are using this information to improve the quality of educational experiences.
- Assessment data are inconsistently used as the basis for making changes across the institution.
- The conclusions faculty reach after reviewing the assessment results and the recommendations that they make regarding proposed changes in teaching methods, curriculum, course content, instructional resources, and in academic support services are beginning to be incorporated into regular departmental

and/or institutional planning and budgeting processes and are included in the determination of priorities for funding and implementation.

Evidence: There are a number of academic departments and programs that have collected considerable data and routinely use that data as the basis for making changes. The department with the longest record of consistent data collection is the engineering department and that department routinely uses the data to inform changes in the syllabi of individual courses and in program requirements. The academic support program also has a strong record of collecting and using data to inform its deployment of resources to meet the needs of students with a variety of different disabilities and special learning needs. Other departments that have presented proposals for curricular change informed by assessment data include the mathematics department and the foreign language departments. Most departments however are in the situation that they have developed an assessment plan, are beginning to collect data, but have not yet proved that the data will be used consistently to inform curricular change. For example, the education program recently developed an ambitious assessment program that has as a major component the evaluation of key assignments in each of the key courses in the professional education sequence. Since these courses have been offered in their current form just twice, the data is only now sufficient to begin analysis. There are still some departments that have plans but have not yet collected any data.

Various college structures are now in place to require assessment data to inform planning. The Educational Policy Committee has in the last two years made it clear to departments that major curricular change must be consistent with assessment data and results from assessment must accompany any proposal for such a change. The academic deans require assessment data to be presented or referred to in the annual state-of-the-department report in which departments make cases for additional resources.

Plan for improvement: The academic leadership needs to continue to give direction to college committees and other decision-making bodies that assessment data is important. A key role here is played by the Educational Policy Committee which needs to be consistent in its message that curricular changes must be informed by outcomes data.