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**Philosophy of the Undergraduate Academic  
Program Review Process**

By James A. Anderson and Marilee J. Bresciani

Before reviewing the assessment-based Undergraduate Academic Program Review (UAPR) process, we first need to clarify our desire to use the assessment-based UAPR process to transform the institution. I want to give you our reasons as to why we have committed to this effort. First of all, integrity, professional, and public accountability underscore a lot of what we are doing. We are asked for feedback a lot by the legislature by the UNC system and we give them that feedback. At a more fundamental level, the leadership of the campus, the leadership in academic programs, and other programs, felt motivated to make sure that we are accountable to our primary constituents, to our students. Student learning, a student-centered environment, a learning-centered environment is the thrust behind a lot of what we are doing.

A second reason why we wanted to transform the institution is that we wanted to give meaning to the words that we use when we talk about "high quality programming," "institutional excellence"; and "effectiveness." We wanted to be able to defend those things if we were really asked about it. What is the quality of what you're doing in the first year? What is the quality of the multidisciplinary studies effort that you have on your campus? If you're engaged in student leadership and development on the student development side, how do we know that the investment of resources in that is really making a difference? So, as one looks across academic programs, disciplines, student-development related programs, if we use these words "effectiveness," "quality," and "excellence," that we're able to really give meaning to that and to defend to anyone who asks us about it the fact that we're engaged in a significant effort.

Third, we wanted to embellish our own definition of a premiere Research 1. We're in a second tier of Research 1's and our goal is to get to the first tier: with Stanford, University of Chicago, MI T, and with the other fine institutions. So we have a definition of what it means to be a premiere Research 1 yet there was a piece that we were lacking; we couldn't demonstrate that we were a learning-centered institution. We wanted to do that because that would embellish and begin to complete for us what that premiere Research 1 definition would be.

Fourth, being a "transforming" institution also means that we wanted to be able to better inform decision-makers; people who are engaged in planning, who are engaged in resource distribution; people who need to have evidence when making decisions about what to support and what not to support. For example, to support our faculty development funding decisions from different disciplines and different programs; we had to have some set of standards. We had to have some rubric, some criteria that would allow us to make good decisions.

Finally, we want to promote integration across colleges, across disciplines, and across programs. In order for us to do that we needed a way to begin to promote a dialogue about what programs were doing, to get faculty for humanities and social sciences, to dialogue with the engineers, to dialogue with folks in agriculture and the sociologists and to talk about the processes that they were using for program review. What we have found as one of the most significant comments from faculty is that they have learned the most when they dialogue with their colleagues from different disciplines.

Thus, we addressed just very simple questions. What are we trying to do? How well are we doing it? How do we know? How do we use the information to improve? Does that work? We start with very simple questions, but we take them very seriously. That is, as we talk about what are we trying to do and what are we trying to accomplish across programs, we ask people to really look at that in earnest, to look at goals and objectives that you have developed and whether or not those goals and objectives are really going to allow you to realize the kinds of significant outcomes that you desire. How well are we doing it? That's the critical question. Are there people on our campus who, when they begin to explore how well they're doing and what they're doing, that they don't want to hear negative information, that they don't want to publicize negative information? Of course there are.

What we have done here at NC State is to try to embellish the confidence of programs, of decision-makers, of deans, of faculty to let them know that there's no retribution whatsoever relative to anything that's unearthed via program review and outcomes assessment. That in fact, no matter how positive or how negative the

findings, it's the feedback loop that's critical in all of this, and to make sure that we're moving together towards realizing our goals of quality, excellence, and effectiveness. How will we use this information to improve? How will we garner the information? What kinds of multiple strategies will we utilize? All of that became part of this process. And then the final test is does it work? "Does it work?" doesn't just mean we get the yield we want in terms of results. "Does it work?" means, "is the faculty, administrative, and student community developing that which begins to value the process. And they'll let you know if they do or if they don't. So it's not a report; it's not necessarily, the yield in terms of results; it's having faculty tell us how motivated they are to engage in a continuous process of improvement.

In terms of the program review process, several years ago (e.g. 1987), we charged an ad hoc committee to begin to look in earnest at the process for not only program review but outcomes assessment. And we agreed on four objectives that would guide our work over the years. First of all, we were going to replace an existing periodic program review cycle with a continuous annual cycle. This was very important, because we weren't able to give programs, departments, disciplines, the kind of feedback they needed, when they needed it. We wanted to integrate the internal academic review process with any other departmental concerns. For example, those departments and those colleges that have other accreditation requirements (i.e. ABET, NCATE, etc.), we wanted to make sure the concerns about the accreditation reviews would be integrated into the process that we were to develop. We wanted to have departments and programs really feel that this was their review, that this was in their hands, that it was not top down, that it was not driven by administration, that we were not going to use the information to burden departments in anyway, and that we were not going to be evaluative and judgmental in this process.

More importantly, the integrity of the process revolved around individual responsibility within a department, within a program to make sure that each faculty member uses the process that was objective, that had integrity, that the decision-making would result from the feedback loop, and that the information would be used to really benefit what was identified as the program goals, program objectives, as the things that each faculty member said were important to what they were doing. We needed to enhance the informational component of academic review. We needed to move away from a primarily descriptive model in which we were talking about how many courses, how many majors, number of faculty, etc. to one that really promoted better insight, that actually gave faculty more of an introspective look into their program. The descriptive model is not going to allow your institution to talk about being a learning centered effort, and we recognized that. All of this together was gradually going to move us forward to begin

articulating a campus wide philosophy that is committed to program review and outcomes assessment.

As you can see, we are talking about an assessment-based program review. There are program reviews that are not assessment-based, as you may be well aware. Our commitment is to one that is. We want to place authority in the hands of the faculty or in the hands of those who run programs in student development. We respect program individuality and flexibility. For example, as we work with the College of Design, there are things that are specific to what they do that shapes how they're going to focus on their process; and those things are different from Engineering.

We want to be sensitive to outside accreditation and internal resource demands, those areas that are not fiscally strong enough now to engage in a lot of significant program review and outcomes assessment. It is the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Affairs' responsibility and the responsibility of the Provost to make sure we support those areas so that they can engage in continuous assessment.

Peggy Maki (2001) has consistently taught for years about the iterative process and one has to be committed to the iterative process, if we genuinely are going to engage in program review and outcomes assessment in the ways that we have referred to it. Even though various programs on our campus are at different points in terms of the maturity of their engagement in the process, that's okay with us.

What we want is a commitment of understanding to the iterative process that identifies where you are as a program, as a department, as a discipline in this process, which begins with illustrating how well you achieve the purposes, the outcomes, the goals that you establish. We do not critique the content of those for departments, programs, and disciplines. You tell us what they are. When we get the information, we review it relative to what you say you're trying to accomplish. And so it will never be the case that the Provost's office, the Committee on Undergraduate Program Review, of the Council on Undergraduate Education, that reviews undergraduate general education; it would never be the case that any of those faculty-driven committees would say to a program, discipline, or department that your goals, mission statements, etc., are wrong. What we will say is, "If this is your mission statement perhaps you need to write it in a way that will allow you to connect it better to your objectives and to measurable outcomes."

In summary, yes, this process that we're describing, that we're talking about at NC State, is about accountability, and about continuous improvement. Faculty ownership is one of the most significant factors in the success of this

assessment-based process. If faculty do not buy into it, if faculty do not have the ownership, it's not going to fly. We have to be accountable to faculty, programs, and departments so that they feel the confidence of knowing that this is not about a top down administrative effort. This is not about our SACS review in 2004. This is all about your program improvement and our commitment to a learner-centered environment; thus learning outcomes are very, very important in this process. Faculty will be given the autonomy to do what they want to do and they will have our help. Faculty can call upon us at anytime; we'll expend all efforts to support them as much as we can.

## References

Portions of this text will be included in Peggy Maki's forthcoming book on assessment, tentatively titled, "Developing and Sustaining an Institutional Commitment to Assessing Student Learning," to be jointly published by AAHE and Stylus Publishers, 2004.

Maki, P. (2001). Student Outcomes Assessment: A Collective Commitment. A Training Presentation for North Carolina State University Faculty. Ferrington Village, NC.

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### CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Marilee J. Bresciani, Ph.D.

Director of Assessment

Division of Undergraduate Affairs

North Carolina State University

126 Leazar Hall, Box 7105

Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-7105

Phone: 919-515-6433 Fax 919-515-4416

[Marilee\\_Bresciani@ncsu.edu](mailto:Marilee_Bresciani@ncsu.edu)

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