

REPORT ON NORTH CENTRAL ACCREDITATION and INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW OF GENERAL EDUCATION: UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The process of institutional accreditation and re-accreditation by the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (NCA) provides UW System institutions an independent assessment of their academic quality and institutional health. The Board of Regents' Education Committee is customarily provided summary institutional reports on recent North Central Association accreditation visits, followed by a presentation and discussion in the committee meeting with representatives of the institution involved. In conjunction with the NCA report, *Academic Information Series 1 (ACIS-1)* requires that the institution also report to the Education Committee on their General Education program. This report should include discussion of: (1) the institution's philosophy of general education, including specific goals for the general education curriculum; (2) an overview of the current general education program; (3) a description of how the general education curriculum provides students with opportunities to achieve institutional goals; and (4) a description of an ongoing assessment process for reviewing and improving the general education program.

In April 2005, the NCA Evaluation Team recommended that the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee receive a ten-year re-accreditation, effective through 2014-15. The NCA Team also recommended two progress reports on: (1) the assessment of student learning outcomes; and (2) enrollment management and the diversification of the student body. Both reports are due in May 2008. The full NCA report is being made available as part of the online Board materials and can be found at: <http://www.uwsa.edu/bor/meetings/archive/2006.htm>.

REQUESTED ACTION

This item is presented for information only and no action is required.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of NCA Accreditation Review

Following its spring 2005 visit, the NCA evaluation team confirmed that UW-Milwaukee continues to meet its accreditation requirements in the following areas: mission and integrity; preparing for the future; student learning and effective teaching; the acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge; and engagement and service.

The NCA Report concluded that UW-Milwaukee has stayed faithful to its mission, articulated 50 years ago, to take advantage of the opportunities and fulfill the

responsibilities that derive from its location as the population, cultural and economic center of Wisconsin. The Report noted UW-Milwaukee's vision that it is a center for knowledge creation and research, with scholarship representing the primary means by which the University will grow. The Report also noted, however, that this vision must transpire while maintaining a level of access that meets the educational needs of Wisconsin. Within this context, the Report concluded that there have been noteworthy successes over the past decade. These include:

- *Enhancements in strategic planning* – New levels of strategic planning have been implemented and institutionalized leading to positive outcomes (for example, more successful fundraising and degree completion efforts).
- *Enhancements in scholarly capacity* – A broad range of scholarly activities have been expanded and external funding has nearly doubled.
- *Enhancements in engagement* – The University has increased its engagement in the greater community significantly.
- *Enhancements in assessment* – Programmatic assessment, in terms of student learning outcomes, has been initiated campus-wide, and local exemplars are in place for continued improvement in this area.

With both broad-based and specific programmatic successes from the past decade providing the setting, the NCA report also noted that challenges remain to be met by the University. These include:

- *Challenges in fiscal resources* – The diversity of demands on the University, when coupled with reduced financial support from the State, means that an array of resource-related challenges will need to be met. Realistic budgeting as well as increased external fundraising are both key components that are needed to meet this challenge.
- *Challenges in enrollment management and diversity* – As the University reaches its projected student capacity, efforts must be made to assure that the distribution of students between undergraduate and graduate programs is appropriate and that the diversity goals of the University are met.
- *Challenges of assessment* – The initiation of outcomes-based assessment plans in units across campus holds the promise of significant improvements in the collection of data. Making sense and making use of these data will be vitally important if the university wishes to make general progress in enhancing student learning, programmatic assessment and improvement on campus.
- *Challenge of scholarship* – The maintenance of scholarly productivity and the enhancement of the connections between that scholarship and the broader community are indispensable to the long-term vitality of the University.

UW-Milwaukee is aggressively implementing initiatives to address the reporting requirements for the 2008 progress reports requested by the NCA Team, focused on the assessment of student learning outcomes, and enrollment management and the diversification of the student body.

1) The assessment of student learning outcomes.

Across the institution, UW-Milwaukee faculty and staff engage in assessment practices that focus on courses, faculty, degree programs, offerings of the academic units, and the university as a whole. UW-Milwaukee is continuing to strengthen and extend the range of assessment activities, with a special focus on the assessment of student learning outcomes.

Many programs have strong direct and indirect measures of student achievement for majors, including capstone courses, comprehensive exams, research papers, artistic performances, etc. General Education assessment is well established for the core competency areas, and the campus has approved measures to ensure that assessment is similarly rigorous for distribution areas. Significant advances have been made on the campus to document assessment practices and formalize the use of such data in decision making. Departmental student learning outcomes assessment documents are posted on the web pages of the schools and colleges and linked to the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research's website. Departments continue to work to improve their assessment processes and formalize the use of direct and indirect assessment data in making curricular decisions.

In preparation for the NCA 2008 follow-up report, UW-Milwaukee has initiated a Campus Assessment Council to coordinate departmental assessment of student learning outcomes and is planning to implement WEAVE, a web-based assessment reporting tool. There are also a variety of General Education assessment activities, which are described below.

2) Enrollment management and diversification of the student body.

UW-Milwaukee has launched Access to Success, a comprehensive program that encompasses enrollment management, student access and success initiatives, and the University's diversity plan (Milwaukee Commitment II). Access to Success begins with recruitment and admission strategies to maintain access, while also increasing enrollments of diverse, high-achieving students. Most of the strategies adopted in Access to Success comprise a comprehensive and coordinated program to increase first-year student success that includes a Summer Bridge Program, the Freshman Mentoring Network, First-Year Transition Courses, Academic Advising Assessment, Honors programming, redesigned Mathematics courses, a new Multicultural Student Center, Tutoring, establishment of community recruiting sites, Supplemental Instruction, Teaching Teams, and the creation of a web-based Early Warning System. The goals of Access to Success are to:

- Increase first-year retention for all freshmen, especially for freshmen of color and freshmen requiring developmental work, while building the overall diversity and achievement of the student body;
- Increase graduation rates of all students at the institution; and

- Close the gap in retention and graduation rates between students of color and their white peers.

In the area of recruitment, UW-Milwaukee Access to Success initiatives are reaching out to the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), as well as alternative and charter schools in the area, through a variety of intensive and focused approaches.

While it is too early to assess the impact of Access to Success on its overall goals, the data do show that, for the entire freshman cohort as well as for targeted groups, those who participate in these strategies demonstrate higher retention and achievement. Especially impressive interventions include Summer Bridge and Supplemental Instruction programs. In addition, students with low math preparation who took a pilot math course that employed technology with instructor/tutor support completed two sequential math courses with high grades in a single semester, enabling them access to curricula requiring college-level mathematics. Based on its assessment of these pilot initiatives, UW-Milwaukee is now expanding program capacity and student participation.

Concurrent with these institutional changes, UW-Milwaukee is participating as one of the pilot UW institutions in the Equity Scorecard project, which seeks to foster educational excellence by closing the achievement gap for historically underrepresented students. The Equity Scorecard is a process of sustained inquiry, using disaggregated data to identify more refined pathways and strategies for eliminating inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes.

The institution believes that all of the measures above will address the specific concerns of the NCA Report.

II. Overview of General Education

In many respects, Milwaukee and its environs are experiencing changes that are occurring in other cities in the United States and throughout the world. In this context, the UW-Milwaukee faculty recognizes that students attending the University must be provided with the intellectual tools and perspective that can address the increasing complexity and magnitude of the world that they will face in their daily lives and professions. UW-Milwaukee faculty members broadly recognize that student learning should foster the development of a foundation for lifelong learning. General Education remains the foundation for that learning.

Among the curricular requirements and options placed before UW-Milwaukee undergraduate students in response to these challenges are the following:

- The General Education component (GER) of every student's program balances the intense focus on a particular area of study with a broad exploration of the arts and humanities, social sciences, and sciences.
- The rich context of a General Education is designed to help students develop an outward-looking intellectual attitude in their lives.

- The GER also stresses ethnic diversity with its requirement that students take at least one course that centers on the subject matter of ethnic diversity.
- The General Education Cultures and Communities certificate program promotes understanding of North American urban society. Its innovative feature of immersing students in Milwaukee community settings has been called a “study abroad at home” experience.

UW-Milwaukee’s specific General Education Requirements (GERs) emphasize breadth of knowledge and the skills of intellectual inquiry. These requirements comprise seven goals. Students should:

1. develop a strong foundation of verbal and quantitative skills;
2. understand the roles of methods and processes and their constraining effects on thought;
3. gain cultural and historical perspectives on the world;
4. develop consciousness of self in relation to tradition;
5. appreciate creativity, including the creation, testing, and application of ideas;
6. see how ideas relate to social structures; and
7. understand how values infuse both action and inquiry.

In order to meet these goals, UW-Milwaukee’s General Education program requires students to acquire basic competencies in math, foreign language, and English composition, and to take classes spread across a credit-distribution pattern in the arts, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. There is also the cultural diversity requirement.

An innovative component of UW-Milwaukee’s General Education program is the Cultures and Communities certificate, mentioned above. This certificate affords students the option of focusing their distribution requirements through designated, interrelated Cultures and Communities courses. Learning goals for the Cultures and Communities certificate address students’ ability to reflect critically on their own cultural identity in relation to the historical and social construction of categories such as “race” and “ethnicity,” and their ability to collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds.

The lasting impact of UW-Milwaukee’s General Education program is evident in the 2003 survey of alumni: 73 percent of respondents with bachelor’s degrees reported that UW-Milwaukee was very helpful in helping them acquire a broad general education. When alumni were asked to evaluate various components of their UW-Milwaukee experience, general education was one of the items that scored highest.

Institutional Review and Assessment of General Education

All undergraduate degree students at UW-Milwaukee are required to fulfill General Education requirements (GER). The Academic Program Planning and Curriculum Committee (APCC) is the governing body for the approval and continuation of any course carrying GER credit. A subcommittee of the APCC evaluates the syllabus

and course request form and recommends to the full committee formal designation of courses that satisfy the requirements.

Historically, the competency areas of the General Education Requirements have been the focus of much attention, and the assessment of student learning in math, foreign languages, and English composition is quite developed. For example, the composition faculty makes extensive use of portfolios and reflective essays for assessing student learning; the mathematics faculty carefully tracks student placement, achievement, and progression in the math sequence; and the foreign language faculty uses proficiency guidelines established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Currently, assessment activities are used to make decisions about placement, class size, teaching practices, tutoring, and course content. Indirect assessment of General Education also results from UW System surveys, the Graduating Senior Survey, and alumni surveys. Responses to the educational and personal growth sections of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) have been used to gain insights into student perceptions of learning.

In contrast to the competency areas, assessment of courses meeting the distribution requirements has been less rigorous. Recognizing this gap in general education assessment, a General Education Assessment Committee was created in the spring of 2003 to address the status of current assessment activities and to plan for improvement in institutional policies and assessment requirements. The assessment focuses on the extent to which the courses meet the seven principal goals of the GERs.

The Committee reviewed all existing assessment activities and developed detailed plans for those areas without adequate assessment practices. In fall 2003, it drafted guidelines that the committee believed would be helpful to the College of Letters and Science and the Peck School of the Arts in developing the self-study document for the impending UW System 10-year program review of the General Education Requirements. This document asked specifically about the assessment practices in place to determine student learning in GER courses.

Ongoing discussions with the APCC are focused on the following agenda:

- Develop specific guidelines within the program review document addressing GER assessment practices and resulting program changes.
- Retain permanent subcommittees for GER and cultural diversity to review requirements and course listings; and
- Delist courses that no longer are able to demonstrate linkage to UW-Milwaukee's general education goals and assessment practices.

The work of the General Education Assessment Committee and the Academic Program Planning Committee has reaffirmed UW-Milwaukee's overall general education goals. With acceptance of the Committee's recommendations, a periodic review for GER courses requiring evidence of effective assessment will be conducted. Faculty members teaching GER courses are expected to link specific course learning goals to GER goals

and to report on how the course is meeting these goals on an annual basis. Institution-wide student and alumni survey data will be provided to GER faculty and programs as another source of data for their deliberations, and data are beginning to be used for student retention and enrollment management purposes. The overall philosophy of UW-Milwaukee's assessment activities is to focus assessment as close to the classroom as possible, and to engage the departments and Associate Deans in the divisions. Departments are held accountable for their assessment practices by the Academic Program Planning Committee and the Provost through the program review process.

UW-Milwaukee's capacity for General Education assessment will be further enhanced by its participation in the 2006 UW System Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Grant program. Through the grant, "Understanding and Describing Student Learning in General Education Courses," UW-Milwaukee's Center for Instruction and Professional Development will: develop models that will better define general education frameworks; connect general education goals to instructional methods and proposed course work; assess student learning in terms of General Education criteria; and encourage cohesive systems for support of student learning in the General Education program.

RELATED REGENT POLICIES

University of Wisconsin System Academic Planning and Program Review
(November 10, 1995), Academic Informational Series #1 (ACIS-1.0 revised June 2006)

87-1, Principles on Accreditation of Academic Programs (3/6/87).

92-7, Academic Quality Program--Assessment (9/11/92).