

Chapter XVI: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES FROM THE 1994 NORTH CENTRAL SELF-STUDY & EVALUATION

The following are excerpts from the 1994 North Central Self-Study & Evaluation document with a few parenthetical comments from the editor:

The 1994 NCA REPORT

Through the self-study process for the 1994 North Central Association report, Northeast identified these perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current assessment program.

Strengths

1. Comprehensiveness of the assessment program is a definite strength. Northeast maintains an ambitious level of assessment of every student at the University. The University has made a solid commitment that student learning is paramount by its use of comprehensive monitoring and analysis of student achievement.
2. Northeast's assessment program based on multiple measures remains a primary strength. It demonstrates Northeast's commitment to good practice and makes it unlikely that assessment data will be misused.
3. Assessment is an essential part of the culture of the University community. It is expected to be at the center of any discussion which involves student learning or curriculum decisions.
4. Northeast has a large database of information about students and their learning due to its long-term commitment to a comprehensive and continuous model of assessment. Many changes at the University can be chronicled by looking at changes in the assessment data.

The assessment program has not remained static. Northeast has a history of continued, deliberate evolution of the program, while carefully maintaining the essential core efforts, namely the value-added, comparative and attitudinal components.

5. Extensive faculty involvement in the assessment enterprise characterizes Northeast. Faculty, mindful of assessment results and its purpose, positively affect classroom experiences.
6. As the University has made greater use of qualitative methods, there has been an increase in faculty involvement in assessment from design to administration to hands-on evaluation.

(The editor believes that all of these strengths continue to be true.)

Weaknesses

1. Student support of and appreciation for the usefulness of assessment are major concerns for the assessment enterprise. Data on the ISS show that student opinion toward the usefulness of assessment to improve their education has dropped over the last five years. It is important for the University to address this issue and find ways to make assessment more meaningful to students.

(General editor: Student appreciation of the value of assessment continues to be a concern. Motivation in doing well on tests and taking surveys seriously is dealt with in a later chapter entitled “Student Motivation.”)

2. Faculty and staff support and knowledge concerning the assessment program have also become a great concern for the assessment enterprise. Decreased emphasis from 1990 to 1994 and large numbers of faculty hires in the past few years with little training concerning assessment have allowed an erosion of the assessment culture. A renewal of the culture needs to be addressed.

(General editor: Interest in assessment among faculty, staff, and administration have increased considerably since 1994. But more needs to be done.)

3. Some of the dramatic improvements demonstrated through assessment in early years have, predictably, reached plateaus. Moving to postures of maintenance rather than great change was expected and discussed frequently during earlier reviews of the data. The University must find ways to maintain improvements with the same fervor that brought them about.

In summary, the greatest concern facing the assessment enterprise is regaining and maintaining support for assessment throughout the University community. This obstacle is not surprising given the passing of time, changing administration and hiring of many new faculty since 1984. Nor is it insurmountable. As the current administration again makes the power and usefulness of assessment more readily apparent to the University community, Northeast expects better support. The University is working to address this issue in a number of ways through renewed pledges of support from the new administration and emphasis on the use and analysis of assessment data throughout the University community. Northeast states such pledges in the University Master Plan. The plan commits the University to a number of assessment initiatives, including use of existing and proposed measurements for decision-making, and at least three workshops each year which use assessment data.

Future Directions

The University formed the Advisory Committee on Assessment in 1992, beginning a more formal approach to faculty participation in assessment design and analysis. Many faculty had been involved in assessment, but only in ad hoc committees and in response to

requests for information and presentations. This Committee included faculty representatives from each division, Faculty Senate, Undergraduate Council, the Portfolio Task Force and the Sophomore Writing Experience. Several students also serve on the committee. The University charged the Committee to advise and make recommendations to the Academic Vice President on assessment issues. The Committee is also responsible for designing and implementing the portfolio and interview projects. Committee proposals concerning the future of assessment include the following:

1. Investigation of new instruments for Northeast's value-added testing

Due to development of the national assessment movement, a variety of new testing instruments is now available. A faculty committee should be charged to investigate, research and review instruments for possible adoption or adaptation for use at Northeast.

(General editor: The university has changed one of its freshman-junior instruments from the COMP to the Academic Profile. More study of these instruments is needed.)

2. Revision of the Institutional Student Survey (ISS) and Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ)

The ISS and GSQ remained essentially the same for about 10 years. The University has undergone extensive change, most notably in its mission, during that time. Beginning in 1994-95, Northeast will revise these instruments to reflect new directives which are now operational on campus, such as those based on developing University Master Plan which includes a commitment to the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Higher Education." In their current form, the ISS and GSQ do not deal adequately with these changes. Moreover, these two instruments are quite lengthy, so streamlining and assurance of relevance of questions would greatly enhance their usefulness. The Assessment Committee drafted a revision of the ISS and GSQ in summer 1992 which should be finalized for use in 1994-95.

(General editor: These instruments were revised and are now in use. It is possible though that they may be need to be revised again to help the University assess its new Liberal Studies Program.)

3. Elimination of the Summer Orientation Student Survey (SOSS)

The Assessment Committee proposed that the University discontinue administering the SOSS due to the extensive overlap with the CIRP. Formerly, freshman responded to both. The University adopted that proposal and now administers only the CIRP to incoming freshmen. Truman can include several SOSS questions in the CIRP as locally developed additional questions. This will permit continuation of an important historical database.

(General editor: The SOSS was discontinued. The CIRP, which provides comparisons to other universities, is now used.)

4. Continuation of the Employer and Alumni Surveys

For the time being, the University should continue to administer the alumni surveys. The state of Missouri is appropriating funds to the Coordinating Board of Higher Education (CBHE) to conduct statewide alumni and employer surveys. In time, the CBHE survey may meet the needs of Northeast, in which case the University may discontinue its own alumni survey.

(General editor: The Alumni Survey and Employer Survey are now receiving more attention. The results have recently come back on the 1996 Alumni Survey and the follow-up Employer Survey is about to be sent out.)

5. Continuation of the Interview Project

The University should continue its use of structured interviews. Such surveys can provide a great deal of information on specific or general topics, such as the pilot study on classroom experiences. Furthermore, Northeast's commitment to using faculty-student interview teams results are internalized by decision-makers responsible for the classroom.

(General editor: Student Interviews are continuing. The last two years the interviews were conducted with first year students. The class and the questions asked may change from year to year depending on the concerns of the faculty and administration.)

6. Other Directions

The Assessment Committee has proposed the formation of a Junior Seminar in which much assessment activity could occur "on the University time." The University could administer the COMP and CAAP tests and the Sophomore Writing Exam at the beginning of the semester so scores could be returned and discussed before the end of the class. Northeast could also administer the ISS so that 100 percent of eligible students could be included in the survey, rather than the current response rate of approximately 30-40 percent. The Assessment Committee believes that designing such a course would facilitate the University's commitment to making assessment data more useful and relevant to the student.

(General editor: The recently passed Liberal Studies Plan asks that Junior Interdisciplinary Seminars collect ISS instruments—which should dramatically increase the percentage of surveys that are returned. The same course will also be asked to help facilitate what is now known as the "Sophomore Writing Exam." However, much of the work for that examination will still come from the Writing Assessment Office. There is currently no plan to change when the freshman-junior exams will be scheduled. Those tests are now the CAAP and the Academic Profile).

EXCERPTS FROM EVALUATION REPORT OF NORTH CENTRAL TEAM RELATING TO ASSESSMENT—FEBRUARY 1995

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The Self-Study Report prepared by the University was well-written and faithfully followed the new format for evaluation. It will stand as an excellent Report for demonstrating how a focus on assessment of student learning and achievement can guide the continuous improvement of a self-regarding university.

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The comprehensive assessment program at Northeast is directly linked to the purposes and goals of the institution. The program is conducted for both accountability and improvement. It plays an integral role in both planning and instituting efforts towards excellence at the institution. Northeast has received notable national publicity because of its success in implementing assessment programs.

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Northeast has an effective administration and governance system. The Board of Governors is appropriately involved in university governance and supportive of Northeast's mission. Minutes of board meetings confirm the commitment of the Board to Northeast's focus on assessment of student learning and achievement.

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Program reviews of all disciplines are scheduled every five years, often with the use of outside consultants. The process, however, leaves a good deal to be desired in that the participants in the review are very narrowly drawn.

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The analysis and interpretation are conducted by the information users and decision makers. The goal is to have centralized data for storage and to assure uniform definition, but to decentralize the data for analysis. The institutional researcher provides the data but does not interpret or make recommendations based on the information for the managerial functions dealing with programs and resources (space utilization, faculty load, modeling and simulation, efficiency studies) and planning functions for direction and strategy planning (trends over time, scenario building, alternative strategies). To facilitate communication about the type of information needed, the director is an ex-officio member of several campus committees.

Assessment at the graduate level has developed unevenly. Placement in a Ph.D. program, comprehensive examinations of the students, survey data from program graduates and from employers, a nationally normed examination upon program completion, and certification exams are used by one or more programs. A new graduate student survey document appears to address the need for some consistent assessment information across graduate programs, but it has yielded no data to date.

The Team does suggest that Northeast consider whether the strong focus on assessment especially the quantitative focus using nationally normed subject tests in the Science Division, doesn't deflect a bit of attention from integrative learning.

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Assessment plays a central role at Northeast. The locus of overall responsibility for the conduct of assessment lies with the Vice President for Academic Affairs, who assures the coordination of the collection, analysis, and dissemination of the information. The data and technical support for the assessment activity is provided by the Director of Institutional Research and Budgets who reports directly to the Vice President in his assessment role. The activity is also supported by the Coordinator of Testing & Reporting who reports to the Director of Institutional Research and Budgets. The responsibility for designing the program, interpreting the data, and making decisions about changes, however, appropriately lies with the faculty. The Vice President's Advisory Committee on Assessment plays a key role in designing and implementing various assessments, e.g., the use of the interview project to gather information beyond that gathered by institutional surveys, portfolios, Sophomore Writing Experience, etc. Both the Academic Vice President and the President are highly knowledgeable about and supportive of the assessment program.

Assessment at Northeast began in 1973 with assessment of student learning in the major. Assessment in general education started with a 1975-77 project that was designed to determine the extent to which Northeast was successful in providing a quality education for students. The early program of a test-retest, value-added model of quality assessment for which Northeast became nationally known, has been augmented in subsequent years. A multiple measure model is used for assessment of both general education and the major. Assessment of higher-order thinking skills is achieved primarily through the junior interview project, the senior portfolio, and capstone experiences. The monitoring of the portfolio maintenance and the extent to which it is used for feedback to students appears to be uneven.

Areas of the affective domain, an important part of the institution's student goals, were identified in the *Five-Year Planning Document* but are less comprehensively assessed, e.g., self-esteem, self-confidence, readiness to accept challenges, and contribute constructively and creatively to society. The Vice President's Advisory Assessment

Committee indicated, however, that increased attention would be given to this area by the newly established subcommittee that will be considering the goals related to the co-curriculum. The Student Life program will also benefit from this initiative in their efforts to improve their programs.

Other issues and needs currently being considered by the Vice President's Advisory Assessment Committee include the following: greater recognition by faculty of the value and the goals of the co-curriculum, greater understanding and commitment to assessment from faculty recently hired by the institution, better communication with incoming students about the importance of the program, and more opportunity to embed assessment into courses.

Given the years of experience and the maturity of the program by an outside expert who has not had any previous role with the program, such an evaluation could provide new insights to guide future evolution of its mature, and successful assessment program. Some important questions are: to what extent are advisers using the various types of assessment information for advising regarding course selection and careers? To what extent are students taking the standard examinations seriously? How many of the senior portfolios document all areas prescribed? What are the side effects of the program, both positive and negative? To what extent do the seniors reflect testing fatigue? To what extent do they believe it was a valuable experience and worth the effort? Given the effort and financial resources necessary for such a comprehensive program, to what extent do faculty and administrators believe the benefits outweigh the costs?

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The assessment program, conducted for both improvement and accountability, forms the foundation for and is an on-going, integral part of institutional functioning and planning for continuous improvement. The use of multiple data to reach conclusions and to make decisions mitigates the psychometric problems associated with the measurement of change. The institution has added portfolios, capstone experiences, writing experience. Such activity enhances the teaching and learning function and avoids the possible intrusion of assessment into that central function of the institution. While requiring more time and effort, the use of qualitative methods add to the credibility of the assessment program for faculty. These methods are more likely to capture the higher level thinking skills and other habits of mind central to an arts and science program.

Faculty indicated that assessment enhances a sense of shared values regarding student learning, improves academic climate, creates a shared vision of expectations, and provides a legitimacy for decision making. The Vice President's Assessment Advisory committee is beginning to address the need to help new students and faculty become co-owners of Northeast's culture of assessment. This activity will be critical to the future health of assessment at the institution.

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Northeast, a pioneer in assessment, now must face the issues of a maturing assessment program. The relevance and value of assessment must be clear to everyone. It must take place evenly across the campus or it will not hold its value with all faculty and students. A mature assessment program does not automatically inspire the enthusiasm that it did when it was not only new but unique. As Northeast experiences “mid-life assessment,” how they handle these and other issues may well set the tone for assessment elsewhere in the nation for years to come.

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The university planning is complemented by several division/discipline level planning activities. Each division/discipline employs a planning process that parallels the University model, i.e., an annual review of progress regarding goals and objectives, which also utilizes comprehensive assessment information.

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The *1993-95 General/Graduate Bulletin* describes the assessment program at the institution and clarifies the institution’s expectations of students regarding participation. Northeast also describes expectations of students in a document, *Assessment at Northeast*, which includes details and rationale of the tests and estimates the time required to complete assessment obligations.

Because the assessment program was initiated for a generally shared purpose without an external mandate, no written documentation apparently was deemed necessary regarding the ownership of data, and how the data would and would not be used. General statements did exist that clarified that data would not be used punitively and that cross campus comparisons among programs would not be made. At that time there was a general understanding of these principles of use by the community. Subsequently, however, participants in the institution and assessment changed, and these understandings apparently were not known or shared by some of the persons new to the institution. Institutions designing assessment programs more recently have found it helpful to write such a policy statement early in the program; the fluid participation in higher education also creates a need for such a written statement in the more established programs.

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Strengths

(d) The assessment program is fully mature and clearly meets all expectations of the North Central Association. In the team’s view, the campus culture revolves around its focus on assessment.

Concerns

(d) The University appears to lack a written policy concerning the ownership and use of assessment data. The Team believes both new faculty and staff and new students would be assisted in their understanding of Northeast's culture of assessment if written policies existed.

- (i) Assessment at the graduate level is uneven and does not appear to have been utilized for program improvement. The Team suggests that the purposes common to the assessment of all graduate programs be developed.

The Team Recommendation and Rationale

4. Northeast is a leader in the national movement towards assessment of student learning and achievement. And, it is an intensely self-regarding university that looks for ways to improve itself, including continuous improvement of its assessment programs.