

## Memorandum

From: Senate Ad Hoc Learning Outcomes Assessment Committee 2015-2017 (Chairpersons: Ann Darling and William Nesse)

To: Senate Executive Committee

Re: Project Report and Proposal for creating policy on learning outcome assessment

Date: March 15, 2017

### **I. Introduction:**

This is a report of our Committee's work and a proposal to create policy governing when and by whom program learning outcomes will be assessed. The proposal specifically is to add to existing University Policy 6-001 a new section that focuses on curriculum management and learning outcome assessment.

The documents include (i) this Memorandum, (ii) the recommended draft revision of Policy 6-001, and (iii) a sample template of a department Curriculum Management Plan (as one example of the various guidance documents which will be provided to assist departments in complying with the various documentation requirements under the new Policy contents). Also included for historical purposes is (iv) the February 2015 Report to the Senate from the 2014-2015 Ad Hoc LOA Committee.

This proposal comes to the Senate after an extended period of deliberation and in response to recommendations from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU).

Deliberation about policy regarding learning outcomes assessment has been ongoing. The project began as a direct outgrowth of an accreditation review of the University by the Northwest Commission of Colleges and Universities, with the NWCCU at that time applying to the University a newly developed format for reviews and a new set of accreditation requirements. As explained to the Senate at that time "NWCCU has implemented new academic performance requirements, including development and use of Expected Learning Outcomes and Outcomes Assessment for every academic program at the University." (Senate minutes March 2014). During that review it was established that the University must undertake a thorough examination of and upgrading of its systems for identifying program learning outcomes and conducting regular assessments of learning outcomes. To that end, the Senate has impaneled in series two ad hoc committees, each making substantial progress during its term of activity, to study, strategize, and ultimately develop a policy proposal to respond to the requirements of the accreditation review.

The first ad hoc committee was created by the Academic Senate in spring 2014 and worked through the 2014-15 academic year. As formed by then Senate President Steve Alder, it was chaired by Jennifer Garvin, and worked with the Graduate School Dean's office which had primary responsibility for the accreditation review (valuable assistance from Dean Dave Kieda, and Assistant Dean Jennifer Mabey), The committee charge was to "undertake a comprehensive study of the process of academic assessment at the University of Utah for the undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs." That first committee led a series of Senate discussions in September 2014, November 2014, and February 2015. The February 2015 report to the Senate from that first committee is provided with this memorandum. That committee recommended, in part, that 1) the identification and assessment of program learning

outcomes rests with the faculty, 2) administration's role in this process is to enable and facilitate regular program assessment and evaluation, 3) there should be a new university level committee formed to oversee learning outcome assessment (University Outcome Assessment Committee) and, 4) learning outcomes assessment should be conducted on an annual basis. The work of the first committee was a significant contribution for the University's first major response to the accreditation reviewers concerns regarding learning outcomes assessment, when the University submitted a "Seven Year Self Study" in August 2015. Under the new regime for NWCCU accreditation, the review process is an ongoing process, with periodic reports to document the University's efforts and accomplishments in responding to reviewer-identified concerns.

With the first ad hoc committee having laid a foundation, the Senate in fall 2015 impaneled this second ad hoc committee to carry the work forward, and in particular to complete the task of bringing forward a proposal for a University Policy which will establish University-wide requirements for program learning outcomes assessment, and thereby bring the University into compliance with the commitments from the NWCCU accreditation review. As formed by 2015-2016 Senate President Bill Johnson this committee has been co-chaired by Ann Darling, Office of Undergraduate Studies and William Nesse, Department of Mathematics and included membership from a variety of colleges including Engineering, Nursing, Humanities, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (see details below). The Committee's charge included "developing policy to guide campus wide adoption of outcomes assessment, implementation of which will include provision of supporting guidance materials, development of best practices across campus, and identification of support needed from central administration."

This committee has reviewed the recommendations from the prior ad hoc committee as well as explored best practices from peer institutions including the University of Arizona, University of Washington, University of Nebraska and UCLA. On our behalf Prof. Bob Flores as Senate Policy Liaison visited and met with administrators at the University of Arizona who administer their well-developed program, and held related discussions with representatives of PAC12 member institutions through the periodic meetings of the PAC12 Academic Leadership Coalition.

With the background of the combined extensive groundwork of the prior committee, multiple discussions with the Senate Executive Committee and Senate, and this second committee's additional research and deliberation, we now bring forward the requested proposal for a University Policy for a system of learning outcomes assessment processes, as well as reporting on accomplishments completed or underway for developing related guidance materials.

## **II. Overall Implementation of LOA at the University**

The proposed Policy is one important part of a multi-faceted approach the University is engaged in to implement Learning Outcome Assessment ("LOA"), and integrate it into the management and administration of curricula across the institution.

Guiding principles for the overall project have been to (i) ensure that all important decisions about curriculum planning and assessment are being made primarily by the faculty of the unit which offers the curriculum, (ii) ensure that all academic units are regularly conducting assessment of the effectiveness of their curricular offerings, (iii) assign to appropriate central offices the responsibility of providing units with resources, guidance and other assistance for implementing LOA, and the responsibility to oversee the regular assessments process, and (iv) implement LOA in a lean and efficient manner, keeping to a minimum the demands implementation imposes on individual academic units and central resources, while adequately responding to the accreditation concern and serving the University's commitment to excellence in the teaching mission.

The main functions of the proposed Policy will be to clearly communicate to academic units the obligation to regularly conduct assessments, and to put in place procedures for conducting those assessments and submitting reports about them to a central office.

The University has already made significant progress on developing the resources to assist units in conducting LOA, and setting up centralized systems for assisting units in implementing LOA, and then for periodically overseeing the assessments, and work on those facets of the overall project is ongoing.

First, as a significant step in responding to the NWCCU Accreditation process described above, the University has established and staffed a new *Office of Learning Outcomes Assessment*, located in the Sterling Sill Center, administered by the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Studies (Mark St. Andre), and Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Studies (Ann Darling). The LOA Office has already assisted greatly with the work of this Ad Hoc Committee, including gathering information about best practices from across the University and at other institutions, including PAC12 member institutions. It is already operating a website through which it is offering a growing set of resources to assist units with LOA tasks. <http://learningoutcomes.utah.edu/>

This Policy proposal has been timed such that the LOA Office and its important resources have been made available to academic units well before the new Policy requirements will be taking effect. And the Office will continue identifying, gathering and disseminating useful guidance materials and providing other resources as academic units are implementing the new Policy requirements over the coming years.

Second, the University has identified the offices that will have central responsibilities for guiding initial implementation of LOA throughout the institution, and then ongoing responsibilities overseeing LOA procedures over the long term, and those offices are preparing for their relative roles. Through the efforts of the Ad Hoc Committee and the two offices, it has been determined that the central responsibilities will be shared by the new *LOA Office* (situated with Undergraduate Studies/ the Undergraduate Council) and the office of the *Graduate School* (Assistant Dean Katharine Ullman, Dean Dave Kieda, situated with the *Graduate Council*). The offices are preparing by developing appropriate procedures, guidance materials and other resources to assist units as the units gradually begin participating in the regular LOA reporting process as provided for in the new Policy. The Graduate School has already been incorporating LOA-related inquiries into the guidance materials for units preparing to submit a “self-study” for purposes of a seven-year review.

These assignments of central oversight and assistance responsibility are made in keeping with the principle of maximum efficiency and minimal burden on individual academic units. This arrangement is based on a decision that the newly required LOA-related periodic reporting from individual units should be integrated into the existing process by which the University reviews academic units on a *seven-year periodic cycle*. For that seven-year-cycle review process, which is required statewide by Utah Board of [Regents Policy R4-111](#), the University, through existing Policies 6-001 and 6-200 has long assigned central responsibility for overseeing those reviews to the Graduate Council and Graduate School for most of the University’s academic units (all that offer graduate curriculum, and instead to the Undergraduate Council and Undergraduate Studies Office for the very few units which exclusively offer undergraduate curriculum).

By integrating the new LOA periodic reporting process into that existing seven-year unit review process, as typically administered by the Graduate School, the University will avoid expending central resources to create an entirely new LOA-related review process, and keep to a minimum the burdens that periodic reporting requirements impose on individual academic units. The new LOA Office will share in the central responsibilities by providing its guidance materials and overall expertise on the LOA issues for the

LOA-specific portion of the seven-year review process.

(Note that as further described below, the Policy will call for additional minimal reporting from units in the interim years between the major seven-year review cycles—and the LOA Office will take primary responsibility for coordinating and assisting units with those interim reports on LOA).

### **III. Highlights of Policy Revision**

Earlier it had been contemplated that this project would result in an entirely new University Policy focused solely on LOA. Ultimately, our Committee concluded that it was a much wiser approach to add the LOA topic to the existing Policy which addresses the roles of faculty and the University's academic units, and describes the fundamental characteristics academic units must have to be authorized to offer curriculum. Accordingly, the proposal is to revise existing Policy 6-001 Academic Units and Academic Governance, adding the LOA requirements to a section of 6-001 which governs the "Creation, Review, and Discontinuance of Academic Units." The new content will describe "Principles for initial establishment and subsequent review of academic units with curricular responsibilities." Placing the LOA topic within the Policy governing creation and periodic review of units ensures that the LOA concepts and processes are fully integrated into the structure of each academic unit from the time the academic unit is being initially created, and on through every major seven-year review cycle.

In brief, the proposed policy language accomplishes the following:

- Places responsibility for the creation and assessment of program learning outcomes *in the hands of the faculty* of an academic unit, by placing this LOA work in the context of curriculum management processes, and requiring written descriptions of those curriculum management processes to confirm the primacy of the faculty as decision-makers.
- Rather than create a whole new structure and process (with attendant added burdens and resource requirements) the proposed language inserts learning outcome assessment into the ongoing process of program reviews conducted *every seven years* (in most cases by the Graduate School).
- Rather than structure reporting on program learning outcome assessment on an *annual* schedule (as was recommended by the first Ad Hoc Committee and is followed by some universities) the policy instead adopts what is effectively a *biennial* schedule (requiring one full report integrated with the seven-year cycle self-study of the academic unit, and two interim reports within the *seven-year* cycle).

#### **A. Creating Curriculum Management Process and Plan**

Our research and discussions made it clear that learning outcome assessment needed to be attached to policies related to curriculum management. Conducting learning outcome assessment outside of the goals and structure of a curriculum decision-making process could result in a meaningless exercise; furthermore, the strong sentiment in our group and the previous committee was that curriculum management and learning outcome assessment needed to be vested in the decision making practices of the faculty of the academic unit which has direct responsibility for each program.

Proposed language in 6-001 III 2 b ii A introduces the concept of a Curriculum Management Process, to be described in a written Curriculum Management Plan, with LOA as the central feature of the Plan.

Eventually, each of the University's academic units will prepare written descriptions of their scheduling

for and procedures for conducting learning outcome assessments of the curricula for which that unit is primarily responsible (e.g., each degree, minor, certificate, etc.). That description of LOA procedures will be the most significant portion of a document the Policy refers to as a “curriculum management plan.” In addition to describing the LOA process of the unit, that Plan document will describe the decision-making process followed within the unit (to ensure that the unit’s faculty have the primary authority in decisions over the curriculum).

Implementing the requirement of submitting a written curriculum management plan for each unit will be occur gradually over a seven year period—to keep to a minimum burdens imposed on the units, and to allow the central offices that receive and review the plans to operate efficiently and smoothly.

Any newly created unit (such as a new academic department) must have its curriculum management plan at the time it begins operations. Existing units, however, will not have this requirement applied until a unit comes up for its next regular periodic review (commonly known as the Graduate Council Review), when the unit will submit that plan as an integral part of its self-study report for the seven-year review. Because the University’s existing schedule for conducting reviews of units effectively spreads the entire set of units evenly across a seven-year period, the two central offices that share responsibility for overseeing and assisting with the LOA reporting will have a steady flow of these curriculum management plans with their LOA components coming in over the initial seven years, rather than being suddenly inundated with a large number.

#### **B. Timing--- Inserting Learning Outcome Assessment into the Existing Seven-year Formal Review Process, and Setting Interim Reports on a Biennial Schedule.**

Our research and discussions made it clear that integrating learning outcome assessment in an ongoing process would be preferable to creating a new process and attendant administrative structure. The 7-year academic unit/program review (often known as the Graduate Council Review process) seemed the most appropriate process to target for this integration. Further study of the 7-year formal review confirmed this inclination; attention to LOA has already been incorporated to some extent in that review process. As those familiar with the review procedures will recognize, in the so-called “Redbook” of the Graduate Council in which the procedures are described, existing section 5 invites programs to provide evidence of effectiveness, and learning outcome assessment is one such kind of evidence. Accordingly, the Policy proposed sets as the most important requirement that each academic unit conduct *one “thorough review”* of its LOA on a *seven-year cycle*, and include the report from that as part of the familiar seven-year review of the overall academic unit (submitted to the Graduate Council).

There is also provision for *interim reporting* on LOA within the seven-year cycle, and our Committee recommends a balanced approach for that. Leaving LOA unexamined for a full seven years would poorly serve the University’s commitment to excellence in teaching (and inadequately respond to the NWCCU accreditation concerns). The first ad hoc committee recommended an annual reporting, and several of our peer institutions do employ annual learning outcome assessment. However, after many discussions and careful consideration of the pros and cons, our strong inclination is to require regular periodic assessment on a less frequent schedule, so that the process is both manageable and meaningful. We conclude that annual reporting would likely become merely routine ‘make-work’ and that a schedule of two interim reviews, coupled with one thorough review spread over a seven-year cycle (effectively *biennial reporting*) will be both a wise use of unit-level and central resources and most likely to produce meaningful results.

Proposed language in 6-001 III 2 b ii C 2 a prescribes that learning outcome assessment schedule, with *reports in years 3-5-7 of a seven-year cycle*. One is a *thorough* review report, and the other two are

*interim summary* reports.

### **C. Contents of Learning Outcome Assessment-related Reports**

Again using our discussions and research of best practices, we identified the essential components of the two types of reports which a unit should prepare within a seven-year cycle. Those essential components are described in the proposed Policy, (in 6-100 III 2 b ii C 2 b& c) for both the interim summary reports (3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> years), and the thorough review reports (7<sup>th</sup> year). Additionally, it is our strong recommendation that reporting units be provided with extensive guidance materials and assistance in preparing their reports, and the LOA Office has committed to and has already made significant headway in preparing for that assistance.

### **III. Project consultations, and next steps.**

The 2015-2017 Ad Hoc Committee members included: Margaret Clayton, Nursing; Robert Nathan Mayer, Family and Consumer Studies; Paul Jewell, Geology & Geophysics; Rachel Hayes-Harb, Linguistics and Office of Undergraduate Research; Bill Johnson, Geology & Geophysics; William Nesse, Mathematics; Ann Darling, Office of Undergraduate Studies. Mark St. Andre, Office of Undergraduate Studies was included in our conversations as an assessment expert. \_ Additionally, Senate Policy Liaison and Professor of Law Bob Flores was assigned by the Senate Leadership as ex officio to provide the committee technical assistance in the task of drafting a proposed policy.

As described above, the Committee, with assistance of the new LOA Office, has obtained information from multiple other universities, particularly PAC-12 members, and in particular received valuable information from the University of Arizona.

This proposal has been reviewed by the Senate Leadership Team and by the Associate Dean of the Graduate School. The policy revision project has been tracked through the Institutional Policy Committee as per standard operating procedure for policy changes.

If the Senate Executive Committee finds this report and proposal suitable, we look forward to the opportunity to present the proposal to the Academic Senate before the end of spring 2017, and recommend that it be approved and that the new Policy contents take effect July 1, 2017.

*Attachments:* (a) the recommended draft revision of Policy 6-001, (b) a sample template of a department Curriculum Management Plan, and (c) the earlier report of the 2014-2015 Ad Hoc LOA Committee, presented to the Senate in February 2015.