Supporting Liberal Arts Colleges in New England

Robert Froh, New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Jill Reich and I feel privileged to be here. Jill is the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College at Bates and serves on the Commission of Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) as part of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). I am an Associate Director of CIHE. With Lee Cuba, Professor of Sociology at Wellesley College, Jill and I serve as principal investigators for our Teagle-funded project titled Assessing Educational Practices and Student Learning. Seven liberal arts colleges in New England participate in this consortial effort in partnership with CIHE (Amherst, Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Smith, Trinity, and Wellesley). I will address the expectations and support for assessment provided by CIHE in relation to liberal arts colleges more generally, and Jill will talk primarily about our project.

An op-ed piece by Gar Alperovitz, a professor of political economy at the University of Maryland, in The New York Times (February 10, 2007), presents California and New England as potential examples of regional devolution! This article is quite intriguing as higher education faces several challenges at the federal level that threaten our mission-sensitive standards and our peer review–based accreditation system such as proposal to nationalize accreditation, to compare institutions on a single measure of student learning, and to report individual student record data to the government. “The bold proposals that Mr. Schwarzenegger is now making for everything from universal health care to global warming point to the kind of decentralization of power which, once started, could easily shake up America’s fundamental political structure.” Alperovitz quotes the governor who says of California: “We are the modern equivalent of the ancient city-states of Athens and Sparta.” He references George F. Kennan who claimed our “monster country” would through the “hubris of inordinate size” inevitably become a menace, intervening all too often in other nations’ affairs: “There is a real question as to whether ‘bigness’ in a body politic is not an evil in itself, quite aside from the policies pursued in its name.” Alperovitz suggests that “Regional devolution would most likely be initiated by a very large state with a distinct sense of itself and aspirations greater than Washington can handle. He sees the obvious candidate is California, a state that has the eighth-largest economy in the world: “If such a state decided to get serious about determining its own fate, other states would have little choice but to act, too.” Alperovitz suggests one response might be for an area like New England, which already has many regional interstate arrangements, to follow California’s initiative—as it already has on some environmental measures. So perhaps this meeting represents much bigger themes than we might ever have imagined.

It’s great to come here to talk about assessment within liberal arts colleges in New England at such an important point in time. From an accreditation perspective, we feel compelled to defend the strengths of regionalism (regional accreditation) in face of the national tone, which suggests as Kennan postulates our “hubris of inordinate size” is “a menace, intervening all too often….“ The proposal pushing for national accreditation and access to individual student record data and applying No Child Left Behind to our liberal arts colleges presses us into action. Therefore, we
address the accreditor’s view of assessment as it pertains to liberal arts education within this larger menacing context!

First, I offer some information about liberal arts education in New England that presents our regional case. With regard to New England higher education, 65 percent of the 233 accredited institutions are independent liberal arts colleges and universities, with 35 percent being publicly supported. Our independent religiously affiliated or “faith-based” institutions comprise 13 percent of the 233 institutions. The spring 2006 issue of Connection Highlights, The Journal of the New England Board of Higher Education, indicates that half of the record enrollment of 868,220 New England college students attends independent institutions as compared with about one quarter nationally. We have a number of institutions that are long established with strong reputations, which includes a number of selective liberal arts colleges as well as prestigious independent research universities. The New England culture in general, and higher education in particular, is very protective of autonomy, with a history influenced by a libertarian perspective as represented by a “live free or die” imperative, the New Hampshire State motto. With respect to New England higher education in general, more than a dozen New England “college towns” host 10,000 students or more, led by Boston with its 131,000-plus collegians. We also have a number of liberal arts colleges in geographically beautiful but remote locations.

New England higher education faces some special regional opportunities and challenges. There is a decided bias toward independent higher education. Historically, New Englanders have provided less support to public higher education paying just $159 on average in annual state taxes to support public higher education and student aid in their states, as compared with $225 on average nationally. However, demographically over the next 10 years, high school graduating classes will shrink and fewer than half of those who finish high school will complete the necessary courses and master the skills to be considered “college-ready.” Recognizing these trends, our independent institutions are becoming much more entrepreneurial with academic program development that enables recruiting more prospective students beyond our region and also generating alternative revenue sources. This results in increasingly dynamic and evolving missions for many of our liberal arts colleges.

Support Through Core Accreditation Processes
With regard to accreditation and assessment, CIHE articulates both expectations and support for institutional effectiveness and assessment. Our research universities and particularly our selective liberal arts colleges leverage accreditation processes by identifying areas of special emphases to address themes important to these institutions at particular points in time; almost always one or more of these emphases focus in particular ways on “what and how students learn” (language central within our standards). However, a significant number of our liberal arts colleges face challenges across our standards, so they are not able to select areas of special emphasis in the same targeted way during comprehensive reviews; in addition, the commission may ask for special focused reports and site visits to address particularly critical areas. Through these and many other opportunities, CIHE strives to support ownership on the part of our institutions of the accreditation processes and the standards so institutions use these resources to make improvements and to assure quality. The development of our 2006 standards involved many hearings throughout the region with diverse participation from all of our various types of
institutions. We are very pleased with the articulation and organization of the new standards that support institutional effectiveness and assessment in comprehensive and complex ways (see the references for accessing these standards). On a tangential but important note, commission staff do not participate with evaluation teams on campus visits; instead, we provide many opportunities for ongoing training of evaluators, which enables us to serve our institutions in a support role rather than a judgment role. A significant reason our accreditation support for institutional effectiveness and assessment works well in New England is our geographic proximity and scale. It is rare that we cannot get to all our institutions within a day’s drive. We are also gifted in New England with a number of region-based association efforts that address institutional effectiveness and assessment.

You will find in Appendix A table called “Typical Issues Faces by Liberal Arts Institutions by Topic” that lists some of the common issues that our independent liberal arts institutions face as articulated by the commission in “action letters”; these issues represent challenges to these institutions, and the action letters provide specific analysis in relation to these challenges. These issues are categorized by selected standards: “The Academic Program” (in particular a section titled “assessment of student learning”), “Financial Resources,” “Students” (in particular a section titled “enrollment and retention”), “Organization and Governance,” “Faculty,” and “Physical Resources.” A number of our smaller liberal arts colleges propose substantive changes that may or may not strengthen their financial health but most certainly challenge their traditional liberal arts mission. These are also represented in the table.

A critical emphasis in our processes is the importance of mission sensitive standards, and our standard “Mission and Purposes” compels a sensitivity to the unique and important missions of all of our diverse institutions. This is central in serving the diversity of institutions in New England including our faith-based institutions as one example. We strive to make sure that most members of the teams of evaluators that support the decennial comprehensive review visits have had experience with institutions similar in nature. For faith-based institutions, a recent conversation with Jud Carlberg provided support for this claim. Jud is the President of Gordon College, a sister institution to Westmont. He has been a long time “good citizen” for accreditation and has chaired many visits for CIHE to faith-based and other independent liberal arts colleges. He currently serves on the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) board. Jud indicates that from 25 years or so back to now, visiting evaluators have become increasingly more responsive to evaluating the quality of faith-based institutions in relation to their respective missions.

Support Beyond Our Accreditation Processes
Outside of our traditional accreditation processes, the commission and staff provide individualized support to our institutions through meetings at our offices, campus visits, sponsored conferences, and externally funded projects. Our Teagle Project, Assessing Educational Practices and Student Learning, represents one of these externally funded efforts that we hope will have a significant influence on a number of our institutions over time. Early efforts that led to this project began in the spring of 2002 with some exploratory meetings and pilot and planning projects funded by The Mellon Foundation; our efforts now continue through this Teagle Project, which began this past year and will hopefully with some additional funding take us through the class of 2010’s graduation, with a focus on learning over the four years,
learning within the curriculum and co-curriculum, and learning that occurs both on and off campus. Jill Reich will say more about this shortly.

We provide additional accreditation support to liberal arts colleges in New England that has a considerable influence on the quality of institutional effectiveness and assessment efforts on these campuses. A number of our more financially fragile liberal arts colleges engage with our commission quite regularly through additional reporting requirements and focused visits by evaluation teams. One of our commissioners with considerable financial expertise meets annually with a team of chief financial officers to review six to ten institutions per year with a process called Annual Report of Finance and Enrollment. The results of these reviews go to our commission, who then take appropriate actions to ensure academic quality and sustainability, particularly in moving their student cohort through to graduation.

On a related matter, we provide support to 34 institutions through a financial indicators project funded by the “Davis Educational Foundation.” Through this project we have conducted many strategy and indicator development sessions, and recently we have enabled them to access the Association of Governing Boards Benchmarking Project. A number of these institutions have expressed appreciation for how this has helped them to better understand their financial situations and to communicate more clearly to their boards of trustees and other constituencies.

**Examples of Assessment at Three Liberal Art Colleges in New England**

Please refer to Appendix C for brief descriptions and people to contact for Colby Sawyer, Gordon, and Stonehill Colleges. These institutions were selected to exemplify the results of our work with liberal arts colleges, including the selective liberal arts colleges that Jill Reich will address.

**The Evolution of Support for Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness in New England**

Represented by our “Policy Statement on Institutional Effectiveness” developed in 1992, the commission has continuously encouraged ongoing improvement of institutional effectiveness and assessment processes through accreditation reviews and other forms of support.

One of the earlier projects that I helped the commission to support when I started in 2001 was the Institutional Assessment Portfolio Project funded by the Pew Charitable Trust and the Davis Educational Foundation that took place from 2001–2004. We asked ten diverse institutions to join in a collaborative effort to test this concept. Several excellent portfolios served as models with Worcester Polytechnic Institute presenting one of the strongest examples of this effort (see references for web site). The other externally funded efforts referenced above followed this effort and continue to represent this approach of enabling collaborations among institutions with external funds when possible. Each of these efforts seeks to lead our institutions by example and support with the considerable guidance provided by the 2006 standards. The meetings we sponsor, particularly our NEASC Annual Meeting, which takes place in Boston early in December, bring together diverse institutions in panel sessions to compare and contrast the different and most useful ways they have found to conduct assessment and make improvements.

Participants in a follow-up web survey rated our most recent annual meeting in December extremely positively with one representative comment that gives a sense of the meeting:
[Learned many things:] 1) the college’s need to think of creative ways to meaningfully reward faculty for their efforts to improve skills in advising and teaching; 2) many ideas regarding making better connections between faculty, students/faculty, students/administration, and faculty/administration; 3) renewed enthusiasm for efforts to connect with high schools and develop transition programs, with some new insights regarding same; 4) ideas for thinking “outside the box” in terms of how we assess student learning and what we want to know.

One of the sessions addressed the current Teagle Project and received very positive reviews, with two representative comments:

The student involvement in the Wellesley College research inspired me to think about how students can take a more active role and learn from it!

The idea of using students to conduct focus groups or individual interviews to gather information/data on course paths, degree patterns, and post-graduation hopes (Wellesley College project presented by Lee Cuba, Joseph Swingle, and three Wellesley students) is one that we will want to follow up on.

In considering how CIHE continues to support institutional effectiveness and assessment, what remains silent to the outside world in this peer review context is the countless commission actions and follow-up letters described above that enable institutions to continuously improve through the support of our periodic accreditation review and special report processes. The commission’s actions frame challenges in ways best suited to our institutions at given points in time.

**Evolving Directions for Assessment**

In New England and nationally, we appear to be moving from a period in the assessment movement where “more is better” to a period where institutions are more selective in their use of methods that: provide more that one perspective, balance direct and indirect measures, seek external perspectives to strengthen internal efforts (see Shulman, 2007), and result in actions taken either in terms of recommended improvements or more targeted analysis. On visits to campuses we no longer hear the following comments from faculty cited below with humor:

“In my experience the assessment program ends up being run by a petty dictator who has nothing better to do than create a new bureaucracy and another layer of administration while creating mountains of paper work for other people, and generating massive resistance on the part of faculty.”

“When I hear the word “assessment”…here comes day-to-day syllabus, the matrix of something-or-other, the educator jargon…assessment if showing we’re doing a great job while changing as little as possible…If you want assessment without the quotes, you have to start with honesty first.” (Connor, 2006)

Faculty now either participate actively in selected assessment efforts or listen critically to presentations of findings (see Bruce, 2006, “St. Anselm’s Humanities Program Assessment Book”). In the quest for developing more complex but efficient assessment systems, the efforts of the Wabash Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, who also presented at our annual meeting,
uses “off the shelf instruments” coupled with campus interviews that address their local validity and usefulness in inspiring improvement and action.

**New Challenges for Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment**

We now address a new set of developmental challenges for strengthening assessment and institutional effectiveness. Our institutions now seek to enable consistency of assessment efforts across departments and to align academic and administrative efforts to support more holistic mission-driven assessment. They encourage assessment that strives for contrasting perspectives and measures that can be managed efficiently and cost-effectively to provide data that is trustworthy and will foster improvement and assurance. They critically review what they will sponsor in order to counteract the “more is better mentality” that too often has hindered institutions with more perspectives and measures of quality than can easily be analyzed and integrated. Many seek more candor and openness within their internal communities to support a context of understanding academic and administrative department strengths and areas of needed improvement. Hopefully, this move toward more openness will lead to resolving the nature of the candor and disclosure that institutions can productively and wisely render to their external communities.

The current focus on transparency compels that institutional effectiveness and assessment respond to the needs of external as well as internal communities. Beyond the threat from governmental demands, global pressures soon will compel our institutions to respond to their constituencies who are scrutinizing how institutions are addressing core values of accessibility and affordability across socio-economic strata, as well as enabling the achievement of high expectations in teaching and learning critical to maintaining and improving on our way of life within an increasingly competitive global context. Increasingly, these constituencies seek trustworthy and practical information to evaluate where they should place their trust and support.

From an assessment perspective, we need to act clearly and firmly in response to the information needs of these constituencies in order to secure their engagement and support. By engaging in more transparent assessment efforts, we will make ourselves less vulnerable to governmental pressures for a national system of accountability.

To enable assessment to focus on quality improvement and public assurance of our institutions, we will need to work together to strengthen “public trust” of our institutions in relation to the communities they serve. Without this trust, we may lose considerable control in realizing our varied missions and in supporting the diversity of our students. We will also be compelled to educate in relation to a reduced set of measurable outcomes.

In New England, we will sponsor a workshop in June titled “Increasing Public Trust Through High Expectations and Public Disclosure,” where we will gather presidents, chief academic officers, and senior staff responsible for how institutions project themselves to the public (such as admissions, public relations, and community outreach). Themes that we will address will include:

- ensuring high expectations for “the educated person” given current societal demands (such as critical communication skills; habits of mind and heart; creativity; productive and ethical work; and civic engagement).
• ensuring high expectations for increasing college entry and success rates for students currently not likely to complete college degrees.
• providing more information and opportunities for engagement with our constituencies including prospective students and parents.
• managing the inclination for more government intrusion through more robust institutional and program assessment focused on improvement and public assurance.

Increasingly our institutions will be asked by their trustees, faculty, alumni, donors, parents, current and potential students, and employers to show what and how students are learning and to strengthen the quality of teaching. These constituencies will compel us to show the capabilities of our graduating students in terms of being high quality workers, citizens, and life-long learners. We will need to address the problems and demands arising from rapid globalization that our constituencies face. We will need to work with our alumni and employers through informal interactions and formal measures to realize their needs and resources.

Accreditation can serve as useful leverage in enabling our institutions to raise the level of exchange with their constituencies, to respond to their needs, and to evoke their support. Our mission-centered standards and our self-study and peer review processes provide guidance in: 1) responding to calls for more trustworthy measures, 2) providing more relevant information regarding essential and complex student competencies, and 3) informing us regarding pedagogies and curriculum that best enables complex and creative learning.

In The Chronicle of Higher Education commentary regarding the Spellings Commission Report (2006), Lee Shulman provides the premise for high expectations for learning. He argues that:

…higher education’s goals transcend solely economic purposes. Of course we want students who live lives of economic productivity. But we also want to imbue students with a deep sense of engagement, commitment, and efficacy as citizens in a democracy. We want them to have a strong sense of social responsibility, personal meaning, and a continuing capacity for adaptation and new learning. That broader perspective of what it means to be an educated American has helped fuel our country’s productivity and democratic political system.

He goes on to suggest that with regard to assessment:

…the report [Spellings Commission Report] fails to emphasize...more careful assessment and monitoring of student progress. The most important uses of assessment are not external; they are internal measurements of how well students are doing and how much better they could be doing thus employing assessment to guide instruction through experimentation and innovation…. Every higher-education institution must become a first-rate education laboratory. We cannot call our much-needed innovations “experiments” without generating carefully measured results that can be compared with our own starting points and with evidence from comparable institutions. Those results, too, must be evaluated, shared publicly, and expanded upon. Within higher education we have the expertise and the will to assess student learning responsibly and to learn from each other’s efforts. (Shulman, 2006)

The NEASC-CIHE standards provide guidance in enabling higher education to address broader and deeper goals for teaching and learning, and to develop more complex and efficient systems of assessment that inform and support this broader vision of what it means to be “an educated
person.” See Appendix B for selected standards that emphasize high expectations and public disclosure.

In summing up this presentation, I recall Jamie Merisotis in a speech titled “Accountability and Leadership for Learning,” at the Council for Independent College (CIC) Institute for Chief Academic Officers and Student Affairs Officers on November 5, 2006, who argued convincingly for what he called “making the case.” He said:

> Our new national accountability paradigm…is driven almost obsessively by information—accurate or not—about student learning outcomes. To be sure, student learning outcomes are a critical part of what we do…but that nearly monocular focus has crowded out what I think needs to be a much more sophisticated and nuanced discussion about what higher education contributes in terms of broad social and economic goods. Our higher education institutions do a remarkable job of producing more civically minded citizens, developing individuals who respect and value diversity, contributing to an increasingly productive an flexible workforce…The Institute for Higher Education Policy documented some of these benefits in a study we published last year called *The Investment Payoff*.

Institutions need to make the case, in a specific way about why the investments they make matter, and do so in a very concrete way about their communities. Publicize the results of what you have learned about cumulative learning outcomes from the Collegiate Learning Assessment. Use your NSSE [National Survey of Student Engagement] data to describe the specific ways in which you are engaging your students. Conduct new studies to look at your institutions’ economic to your community. Use CIC’s “Making the Case” as a model for your efforts. Speak directly to policymakers, and to helicopter parents, who are questioning what you do (and how you do it) by giving them concrete answers and specific examples.
**Appendix A. Typical Issues Faced by Liberal Arts Institutions by Topic**

### Academic Program
- implementing and assessing the new core curriculum
- coordinating the co-curricular and extra-curricular experiences with the overall mission of the college
- integrating international experiences into the undergraduate curriculum
- integrating the XX focus of the college’s mission into all aspects of the institution

### Requests for Substantive Change for New Academic Programs
- that the substantive change proposal to offer a Doctor of XX be accepted
- that an on-site evaluation of the Doctor of XX program be scheduled for spring 20XX
- that the college’s accreditation be extended to include the program leading to the Master of Arts in XX
- that the focused evaluation of the college’s pilot program for XX scheduled for spring 20XX be confirmed
- that the spring 2007 focused visit also include an on-site evaluation of the Master of Arts in XX program
- that the report submitted by XX be accepted and the program leading to the Doctor of Physical Therapy degree be encompassed within the college’s accreditation
- that the self-study prepared in advance of the fall 20XX evaluation give particular attention to the college’s success in implementing the Doctor of Physical Therapy program

### Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment
- developing assessments useful in determining quality and making decisions
- developing and implementing a comprehensive system of assessment
- strengthening the quality of its academic programs through systematic program review
- implementing comprehensive long-range planning for the overseas programs and making adjustments based upon experience
- implementing the assessment of student learning outcomes and using the results for improvement, particularly in general education
- that, as outlined in our action of March XX, 20XX, in addition to information provided in all interim reports, the college give emphasis to the institution’s success in continuing to use strategic planning to enhance institutional effectiveness

### Faculty
- assuring a faculty able to meet and sustain the institution’s academic goals and programs
- defining faculty roles in academic decision making
- that, in addition to the matters specified in our letter of October XX, 20XX, the report prepared in advance of the spring 20XX evaluation include an update on the new Master of XX degree, giving emphasis to the college’s success in assuring that faculty teaching in the program have appropriate qualifications
- assuring sufficient staffing to accomplish the institution’s necessary functions

### Finance and Enrollment
- monitoring the institution’s financial status and implementation of its financial plan
- continuing to assure the financial stability of the institution, with particular emphasis on the success of the capital campaign
- developing and implementing a participatory campus-wide system for planning and budget development
- that the reports regarding the college’s financial and enrollment status scheduled for submission in spring 20XX and spring 20XX be confirmed
- increasing enrollment and improving retention rates
- assuring the financial well-being of the institution

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<th>Physical Resources</th>
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<td>• planning appropriate facilities to serve a student population that is currently expanding</td>
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<td>• providing sufficient library and information resources</td>
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Appendix B. Selected Standards Addressing High Expectations and Public Disclosure

The NEASC-CIHE standards provide guidance in enabling higher education to address broader and deeper goals for teaching and learning, and to develop more complex and efficient systems of assessment that inform and support this broader vision of what it means to be “an educated person.”

The Academic Program Standard

Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing learning, including the skills of information literacy. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind. (4.18)

Through the major or area of concentration, the student develops an understanding of the complex structure of knowledge germane to an area of inquiry and its interrelatedness to other areas of inquiry. For programs designed to provide professional training, an effective relationship exists between curricular content and effective practice in the field of specialization. Graduates demonstrate an in-depth understanding of an area of knowledge or practice, its principal information resources, and its interrelatedness with other areas. (4.19)

The institution implements and supports a systematic and broad-based approach to the assessment of student learning focused on educational improvement through understanding what and how students are learning through their academic program and, as appropriate, through experiences outside the classroom. This approach is based on a clear statement or statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The approach provides useful information to help the institution understand what and how students are learning, improve the experiences provided for students, and assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded. Institutional support is provided for these activities. (4.44)

The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students. Inquiry may focus on a variety of perspectives, including understanding the process of learning, being able to describe student experiences and learning outcomes in normative terms, and gaining feedback from alumni, employers, and others situated to help in the description and assessment of student learning. The institution devotes appropriate attention to ensuring that its methods of understanding student learning are trustworthy and provide information useful in the continuing improvement of programs and services for students. (4.50)

Public Disclosure Standard

The institution publishes statements of its goals for students’ education and the success of students in achieving those goals. Information on student success includes rates of retention and graduation and other measures of student success appropriate to institutional mission. As appropriate, recent information on passage rates for licensure examinations is also published. (10.10)
Appendix C. Case Studies

Colby-Sawyer College
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Colby-Sawyer blends quantitative and qualitative elements into its mechanisms for assessing student learning. We have a more than decade-long, well-developed program review process which, through detailed self-review (including perspectives from faculty, students, graduates, employers, and other stakeholders) and the inclusion of outside perspectives (program consultants and national standards), has resulted in changes in program structure and the provision of additional resources.

The new Liberal Education Program (begun in 2002) includes a systematic portfolio-based assessment of student learning to all of our programs and across all four years of students’ experiences. Students create reflective electronic portfolios that document their learning inside and outside of the classroom and the relationship of that learning to our liberal education outcomes. Portfolios contain written elements and may contain audio, video, and photographic images. Sample portfolios are reviewed by a faculty/staff committee, which makes annual recommendations concerning areas for programmatic improvement. We believe this format is best suited to the personalized approach we take to student learning and development. We have long used portfolios and other cumulative capstone projects to assess student learning in our majors.

We also continue to use surveys (e.g., the NSSE), focus groups, and other evaluation tools and devices to assess the perceptions of students, faculty, internship supervisors, and alumni of the outcomes of the Colby-Sawyer educational experience, and the results of these efforts guide all of our institutional planning.

Here is a link to our webpage on liberal education, and there is a link off that page to the e-portfolio information. As it happens, we are in the midst of an update of our whole website, and an update of the content, so some of this does not clearly indicate the progress we have made. It may be useful nonetheless: http://www.colby-sawyer.edu/academic/admin/liberaleducation/index.html.

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Gordon College sponsors many layers of program review and evaluation. For decades the college has sponsored departmental reviews, which include extensive alumni surveys, a self-study, classroom evaluations, and a site visit by a team of external and internal reviewers. Each self-study
addresses a set of 10 critical questions that have been framed about the future of the department and its curriculum. Those questions are originally framed by the department and then evaluated by the Academic Programs Committee (APC) of the faculty to insure sufficient rigor and relevance. The APC endeavors to be sure that the departments are not evading key questions and to help departments refine their focus. Although four of the questions tend to be boilerplate questions used in virtually every review, the remaining questions can be tailored to the specific challenges and needs of the departments. Our hope is that in linking the questions to strategic planning for the future, rather than simply demonstrating basic competency or compliance, the departmental energy and motivation for the review process will be enhanced. So far that has proven to be true. Following the site team’s report, the department prepares a response to the evaluation, which includes specific actions and initiatives that will be taken in the coming years. That response is discussed by the APC and the Academic Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees. A one-year follow-up report must also be submitted to the APC to discuss progress taken in the wake of the review.

The college also participates in several nationwide assessment programs to generate comparative data. Our intention is to use several nationwide surveys rather than to rely on one instrument. At present, our assessment instruments include the NSSE, the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI), and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The results of the NSSE are discussed at a general faculty meeting, and the departmental chairs and Faculty Development Committee collaboratively develop strategies to address the areas in most need of improvement. Our strategy is not to provoke a sustained faculty debate about smaller details in the surveys but rather to identify two or three major items for action and to unite our energies around improving in these areas. Our plan is not to drum the same themes for all faculty, but to engage the department chairs in a collaborative, strategic discussion about the specific places in the curriculum where we need to add more of this practice and refine this practice.

Two years ago the college also joined a consortium of faith-based institutions to apply for a Teagle Foundation grant. We were fortunate enough to receive an initial planning grant, which enabled us to collaborate with other institutions on measurements of biblical literacy and writing skills among students after their first year at college. The college also conducts 5-year and 10-year alumni surveys to learn how graduates perceive their educational and personal development during their time at Gordon. These surveys measure some outcomes (e.g., jobs, graduate school, earnings, religious activities) as well as opinions (e.g., how would they rate the faculty, the academic rigor). Results of the alumni surveys are discussed at faculty workshops and faculty meetings.

One of our more recent attempts to enhance the importance of assessment at Gordon is to bring academics and admissions under the provost’s office. By encouraging collaboration between faculty members and recruiters, we seek to help faculty members become more alert to the kinds of outcomes that concern prospective students and parents, even as we want to use the assessment process to help recruiters understand more fully our strengths and distinctions.
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Stonehill College has relatively new systems for assessing learning outcomes. Developed in response to NEASC pressures in 1999, these assessment measures are now part of a growing culture of outcomes evaluation at the college.

The Cornerstone Program of General Education, revised and implemented beginning in 2002, uses a variety of means to gather information about student performance in six areas of development: critical intellectual engagement, disciplinary mastery, social responsibility, leadership and collaboration, effective communication, and personal growth and development. Some of this assessment is embedded in specific coursework, some is portfolio-based, and some is measured through the Senior Capstone experience. We ask academic departments to use the results of these and other measures as evidence of progress or in support of needs in their program reviews.

In addition to such “local” practices, we also administer a number of assessment measures that give Stonehill important nationally normed data to use in decision making. Chief among these are CLA—which measures critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and writing skills (and thus applies to several of the learning outcomes) and NSSE, which measures a number of areas of student engagement, including several indicators of academic rigor and academic enrichment. In a pilot of writing-intensive first-year seminars, we actually developed a home-grown instrument based on several NSSE questions, including questions such as the number of times students spoke about class material outside of class, number of hours they studied, number of times they met with the professor outside of class time, and number of times they wrote multiple drafts. This information has been very helpful in constructing a first-year experience that truly invites students into a new kind of learning experience.

We are currently working toward the development of programmatic mapping: an institution-wide approach to student development that would allow all college departments to demonstrate how students develop these outcomes through both the curriculum and the co-curriculum.
Works Cited

(All entries can be found on the CIHE web site: http://www.neasc.org/cihe/assessment.htm.)


“A Selection of Institutions Demonstrating Good Practices with Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness.” (Bates College, Middlebury College, Middlesex Community College, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, University of Maine at Farmington).


