

**Visit to Northwestern Health Sciences University**  
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I appreciated the opportunity to visit the Northwestern Health Sciences campus on March 7<sup>th</sup>. The was an exciting visit for me, having first become acquainted with Northwestern several years ago at the HLC/ AAHE assessment workshop and first visiting campus in April 2002. Impressive progress has been made over the past four years. Infrastructure has been developed, policies and procedures put in place, and the campus' assessment initiative has gained traction among faculty. Clearly, Northwestern takes assessment seriously.

Several Observations:

- I think that using the Levels of Implementation at an annual touchstone is a very good idea. It will both provide the university with a measure of progress and also serve as a very useful tool for identifying areas of strength and areas for potential improvement.
- There appears to exist a solid understanding of assessment as “the tool through which we make decisions.”
- In programs where assessment is already part of the everyday fabric of the program, it is sometimes hard to step back and realize that what is being done “counts” as assessment. Given that each of the programs is professionally accredited, assessment is already part of the culture at Northwestern. Numerous faculty provided examples of good practice that they are utilizing (including rubrics and pre and post tests) in their classes. In many cases, assessment is going to be more about documenting what is being done and arriving at shared definitions instead of starting from scratch.
- Faculty support seems to be growing. While it is unrealistic to expect that all faculty will be equally engaged, NW does seem to be approaching a critical mass of faculty who (if not entirely enthusiastic) are accepting of it.
- It seems as if there was a great deal of open communication about assessment and institutional support for faculty to increase their knowledge and skill. Sending faculty to assessment conferences has become a regular practice. Attendance at Brown Bag events has grown. There seemed to be widespread knowledge on campus about assessment activities.
- There still seems to be some feeling that assessment has to be every class every outcome every faculty and every semester. While this is the case for classroom level

assessment, it is not the case for program level assessment. A systematic approach focusing on one or two program level student learning outcomes each course term would be both reasonable and effective. This approach being undertaken for the assessment of the institution-wide learning outcomes is a good model.

#### Recommendations:

- It would be useful to map the each area's professional accreditation standards with the institution-wide learning outcomes and program level learning outcomes. This will provide a useful roadmap for programs responding to various agencies with requests for assessment data and streamline assessment processes on the program level.
- While understanding the role of assessment at an institution is important, it will be critical for Northwestern to document how assessment data is tied to both budgeting and planning on the program and institutional level. The HLC is looking for evidence of this link.
- Streamlining the process of reporting would probably be reviewed positively. While annual reports are helpful, care should be taken to make sure that the process does not become overly burdensome. I'm not sure that technically it is a burdensome process, but it appears that these reports have taken on a life of their own and expanded into a format which might not have been as originally intended.
- Course evaluations might provide an opportunity for students to be able to assess each course's contribution to the achievement of the institution-wide learning outcomes. Certainly not every course is expected to promote each of the 8 outcomes, but this will serve to both reinforce the outcomes for the students while at the same time allowing the university to get a sense of whether or not the institution-wide outcomes are being addressed.

#### Follow Up

As discussed during my visit, I think it would make sense for the April 7<sup>th</sup> faculty development workshop to focus on interpreting assessment data. I'm proposing a half day interactive session emphasizing the identification of patterns in data and translating that interpretation to action.