

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Working Group on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment was established by Commissioner Freeland in January, 2010 to bring together public campus presidents, provosts, faculty members, students, institutional research/assessment directors and a member of the Board of Higher Education in a collaborative deliberation about one of the components of the Vision Project--student learning outcomes and assessment. The Vision Project calls for Massachusetts to “produce the best educated citizenry and workforce in the nation” and establishes student learning achievement as one of the seven outcome areas in which the Commonwealth will strive for leadership. The Commissioner asked the Working Group to examine national best practices and current status on Massachusetts public higher education campuses in two phases of work--the first to focus on campus programs for learning outcomes assessment and the second to focus at the state level on issues of public accountability, comparability and transparency.

The Working Group has met seven times since January, 2010 and has completed Phase One of its work. As requested by the Commissioner we have:

- reviewed national literature, research and best practice on campus-based learning outcomes and assessment,
- reviewed the results of a DHE Survey of campus programs sent to public campus provosts in December, 2009 and designed for comparability with a national survey prepared by the National Institute on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment,
- considered the report of the Commissioner’s Advisory Group on Undergraduate Education (CAGUE),
- considered the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and
- considered approaches to assessment that value our system of diverse institutions and that contribute to reductions in performance gaps over time among different ethnic/racial, economic and gender groups.

We have met with Commissioner Freeland and submitted a Phase One report. This executive summary covers some of our conclusions and recommendations in abbreviated form. The full Phase One report and appendices will be available on the DHE website by September 2010. A Phase II Report will be available at the conclusion of our work in December 2010.

## Major Findings

- Momentum toward greater public disclosure and accountability by colleges and universities and state higher education systems for student learning has been building for several years.
- There is a great deal of consistency between learning outcomes and assessment programs in Massachusetts and patterns throughout the country.
- Most public colleges and universities in Massachusetts have in place a common set of learning outcomes that apply to all undergraduate students, as well as learning outcomes for specific programs. Most Massachusetts public colleges and universities include Communication, Quantitative Reasoning and Critical Thinking among their institutional-level learning outcomes.
- There are substantial similarities among the learning outcomes in place at Massachusetts public colleges and universities, New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) accreditation standards, CAGUE recommendations, and the LEAP “Essential Learning Outcomes.”
- Massachusetts public institutions of higher education have developed student learning outcomes assessment programs that include many of the key components of exemplary assessment programs identified in the literature.
- NEASC standards, guidelines, and data requirements have exerted a strong influence on the approaches that Massachusetts public colleges and universities have taken to program and institutional learning outcomes assessment. Institutional assessment of student learning outcomes is typically done either for institutional program review or for self-studies for accreditation.
- Good assessment of student learning outcomes in Massachusetts derives from the faculty. The level of faculty involvement in assessment is a key indicator of a successful assessment program. Faculty must be responsible for the development of learning outcomes and involved in designing, scoring, analyzing, reporting, and using assessment data with strong support from administrators and an assessment office. Faculty time, effort, and commitment needed for assessment programs to be successful must be recognized and faculty responsibilities must be adjusted and rewarded accordingly.
- It is entirely unlikely that the outcomes measured by Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), the Measure of Academic

Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), or the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) will correlate well with intended learning outcomes articulated locally by the faculty of a given college or university campus. That is, these tests are unlikely to have content validity. If standardized tests are adopted as a common measure across institutions they will supplant the richer, more robust, more evolved, and more useful local assessments that are currently being employed.

- The lack of a sufficiently developed culture of assessment is cited by many public higher education institutions' provosts as a weakness. Assessment is not a one-time event; it must be seen and supported as an ongoing, iterative, cascading process if it is to result in the desired program improvements and better student learning.
- There is a need for more leadership, better coordinated efforts, and access to top notch assessment experts to support the development of top tier assessment programs on Massachusetts campuses.

## **Recommendations**

The Working Group on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment understands both the desire to create a more centralized and systemic approach to student outcomes and assessment as well as the need to maintain decentralized and campus-centered control over student learning. Within the nuances and complexities of that reality, our Working Group:

1. Sees potential value in aligning our state system of higher education with the LEAP framework, including the ability to benefit from assessment frameworks and practices developed by other LEAP states and institutions, the possibility of applying the LEAP framework to increase the achievements of underserved students, and the potential for making comparisons with other LEAP states in the future.

We recognize that the identification of learning outcomes is a responsibility of the faculty and recommend that the identification, implementation and assessment of field specific learning outcomes should remain the responsibility of faculty at individual colleges and universities. We recommend that Massachusetts consider becoming a "LEAP state," but only after having consulted with the faculty of Massachusetts public colleges and universities regarding their opinions of the same.

2. Recommends that individual campuses continue their efforts to develop assessment programs and strategies that clearly reflect their mission, academic programs and co-curricular offerings. Planning at all levels of each institution is necessary and critical in determining the student learning outcomes expected and optimal strategies for assessment. Assessment should occur at the course,

program and campus levels to maximize data collection and continued improvement.

3. Recommends that each campus review its capacity to provide the leadership, expertise, assessment instruments and support to faculty and staff engaged in campus-based assessment activities and to achieve system-wide assessment goals. This capacity should be improved, if necessary, as funds become available. Campuses are also encouraged to consider taking a regionalized approach to assessment and/or the requisite professional development for faculty and staff as a way to reduce program costs and to increase the accessibility of assessment expertise and opportunities for faculty collaboration.

4. Is strong in its opposition to any high stakes standardized assessment instrument for all students in the Commonwealth's higher education system. It is imperative that any approach to the assessment of student learning be sensitive to and understanding of students, communities and missions of the three sectors of public higher education in Massachusetts.

5. Values the concepts presented in *Creating a Culture of Evidence, An Evidenced Based Approach to Accountability for Student Learning Outcomes*, (Millett, Payne, Dwyer, Stickler and Alexiou, 2009) as a holistic, cost efficient process to create and maintain the culture of evidence necessary to improve student learning outcomes on campus. The Working Group encourages each public higher education campus to review the model, or similar models, and consider its implementation on their campus.

6. Recommends that the DHE identify sources and create funds to support both experimental approaches and assessment initiatives at the system and campus level that document the link between assessment results and program improvements.

7. Recommends that the colleges/universities, in collaboration with the DHE, engage a high-profile assessment consultant (guru) to provide vision, expertise, and leadership to system-wide student learning outcome assessment and that each campus identify a point-person for assessment to work with the consultant and other institutional representatives. The consultants work would include individual campus consultations on assessment, tailored to the campus needs, and convening meetings of campus-based assessment staff and representatives of DHE for sharing best practices and challenges and developing common assessment data that can be used to provide evidence of the achievements of public higher education across the Commonwealth. The consultant's work would extend one to two years, with ongoing work the responsibility of campus representatives and DHE staff.

8. Recommends that the repertoire of campus assessment approaches include the capability of analyzing the achievement of comparable learning outcomes

among different ethnic/racial, economic and gender groups and encourages campus efforts to narrow performance gaps. DHE should play a helpful role in support of this objective by providing consultative assistance as well as templates and tools for ways to disaggregate and analyze data so that performance gap analysis becomes a part of ongoing institutional research activity on each campus. Given the high costs involved in achieving sufficient sample size to allow for disaggregated analysis, system-wide and segmentally-coordinated approaches make fiscal sense.

9. Recommends increasing the collaborative spirit between DHE and NEASC with regards to the assessment of student learning.

10. Sees value for the Commonwealth and for individual campuses from the use of NSSE and CCSSEE assessment tools and consortial arrangements within the framework of multiple assessment approaches and recommends further examination of the possibilities during Phase II activities of the Working Group on Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment.