

Higher Learning Commission
The Academy for Assessment of Student Learning
Academy Application
2014-15

South Dakota State University

Brookings, South Dakota

3-19-15

Name of Institution

City, State

Application Date

Preferred Point of Entry to the Academy: June 2015

Request for Academy participation: Open Pathway Quality Initiative

Recent Efforts

1. What is your “assessment story”? Evaluate your past and present efforts.

In response to the South Dakota Board of Regents (SDBOR) assessment initiative launched in 1985, SDSU created the Office of Academic Evaluation and Testing with a full-time coordinator. The University also established a university level academic assessment committee composed primarily of faculty. As a result of the work of the coordinator, the committee, faculty, department and college academic administrators, by 1991, all undergraduate programs had an approved assessment plan in place based on measurable student learning outcomes. The focus on graduate program assessment plans began in 1993 and currently, the majority of graduate programs have an approved assessment plan. These plans are updated as needed and reviewed on a 3-to-4 year cycle.

Other milestones related to assessment include an office name change to Academic Evaluation and *Assessment* and the change in title from coordinator to director (1994), along with the use of the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) exam to assess general education (1998), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) beginning in 2000 and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) beginning in 2003 for use as a measure of student engagement. Additional national surveys have been used periodically including the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey and the College Student Inventory (CSI). The strategic planning process has resulted in the identification of performance indicators which are used to measure progress toward strategic goals. Currently, academic programs are subject to review per external specialty accreditation or the institutional program review process.

In summary, SDSU uses a multi-tiered assessment strategy with institutional level assessments employed across a student's career at the institution (entry level, first-year, mid-program, senior, alumni and employer assessments). Program level assessment is also used per the assessment of undergraduate and graduate programs.

The establishment of a dedicated office, with a full-time director as well as a university-level assessment committee has communicated administrative support for assessment and continues to do so. The identification and measurement of student learning outcomes for all majors/programs and for all courses approved to meet general education requirements provides the university with a mechanism whereby program goals and objectives and curriculum can be adjusted as needed. The participation of the majority of programs/departments in the program review process helps enhance academic quality. This dedication of resources and numerous accomplishments related to assessment were recognized as strengths for SDSU per the most recent HLC comprehensive self-study and visit in 2009. In particular, the review team noted the dedicated office and staff, the establishment of student learning outcomes and assessment plans for all programs, and the involvement of faculty in assessment activities.

Even though SDSU has a strong foundation of assessment, limitations and barriers exist. One limitation of the early work on assessment was that the focus was limited to the academic programs and did not include other entities at the university. Currently, some co-curricular activities have assessment plans, yet not all do and results of these assessments are not readily available. The institution also lacks a software/management system which can serve as a central repository for assessment data so as to provide an interactive data base and reporting mechanism. While all programs have assessment plans, they vary in quality and in the degree to which results are used to inform needed changes to support greater student learning. It has also been observed that the CAAP exam is not well aligned with the general education student learning outcomes thus providing limited useful data. Currently, SDSU is part of a South Dakota Board of Regents system-wide review of the general education curriculum that includes the development of an updated and more appropriate assessment plan for general education.

There are also structural changes underway regarding the leadership and management of assessment at SDSU. In 2014, the Office of Planning, Decision Support and Assessment was established and the former director of Academic Evaluation and Assessment retired. Currently a search is underway for a Director of Assessment who

will be housed in the new office. In addition, a new SDSU Academic Testing Office will be launched during summer 2015, and a search is underway for the manager of this unit. These changes result in the decoupling of the assessment and testing functions carried out by the current Office of Academic Evaluation and Assessment.

Given the current state of assessment of student learning, on-going structural and leadership changes, system-wide changes in the general education curriculum and assessment, this is an ideal time to analyze the current state of assessment and develop plans to take assessment to a new level of excellence at SDSU.

Needs and Benefits

2. What are the most pressing needs that you expect to address via your participation?

SDSU has numerous needs to address through participation in the HLC Academy. One of the most pressing needs is related to the *varying quality of current program assessment plans*. Several of the University's undergraduate programs/departments (e.g., Engineering, Nursing, Teacher Education, Pharmacy, etc.) hold specialty accreditation through external accrediting bodies which mandate robust and comprehensive assessment plans as well as the use of assessment results to support on-going improvement. Other programs do not have as strong a culture and knowledge base for designing and implementing assessment plans designed to foster increased student learning and success. Even though assessment plans are on file for the majority of programs, the degree to which program faculty and administrators use the results of plans varies as well. Thus, there is a need for greater consistency in the quality of assessment plans and the on-going use of assessment results to improve student learning.

The University also needs to *broaden the scope of assessment to include co-curricular units and activities*. Student learning outcomes need to be identified for key co-curricular activities along with the identification of appropriate measures and metrics to document current levels of student learning and where programs need to be improved.

SDSU engages in a number of surveys to learn about our students' and faculty's experiences in and out of the classroom. The findings of such efforts are intended to be used by the institution to make improvements and provide evidence of student learning for a wide variety of constituents both on and off campus. While some information is available, *a more robust and well-organized plan/strategy to share relevant information about student learning is needed*.

Related to this need for greater transparency and availability of information, SDSU does not use any type of software to help manage assessment data, thus the preparation of reports is time-consuming and at times results in the use of incomplete or even inaccurate data. Because data is accessed via numerous offices and systems, those responsible for reporting are challenged to readily locate the needed information and thus may pay little attention to trying to understand the evidence and its relation to program goals and student learning. We plan to rectify this situation by purchasing software as a repository for assessment data and resulting actions.

Work also needs to continue to *foster a culture which values and uses assessment as a means of improving teaching and learning and overall institutional effectiveness.*

3. Why is the Academy key to your success at this time?

Participation in the Academy will help support progress in addressing the needs related to the assessment of student learning in the following ways:

- *Access to resources* – a plethora of information on assessment is readily available. Yet identifying credible sources and tested strategies can be a challenge. Academy activities will connect participants to resources more closely aligned with needs and goals.
- *Provide credibility and structure to the process* – specific deadlines for application, planning and project completion provide an imposed structure to help ensure timely progress toward goals.
- *Access to individuals* at other institutions also focused on assessment of student learning – the opportunity to connect with other higher education professionals via electronic and face-to-face formats provides a built-in support network for the challenging work of assessing student learning. All can learn from the mistakes and success stories from other institutions.
- *Access to objective and expert feedback* – constructive criticism is invaluable in the process of improvement.
- *Provides university-wide focus and accountability for results* – the commitment to participate in the Academy as the Quality Initiative for the university results in greater expectations for accountability and improvement.

As noted in question #1, this is a particularly opportune time for SDSU to participate in the Academy given that current assessment practices have been in place for over two decades, the availability of new and more sophisticated assessment techniques and strategies, along with the decoupling of the assessment and testing functions through the establishment of the Office of Planning, Decision Support, and Assessment and the search for a new director.

4. What are your goals for the Academy participation? What do you think will be your focus during the Academy (e.g. projects, initiatives, activities, work)?

The goals for SDSU's participation in the Academy are in response to the needs identified in question #2. Preliminary ideas for activities to meet the stated goals are identified below.

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of the current SDSU Assessment Plan with particular focus on the examination of the undergraduate and graduate academic major/program and co-curricular assessment plans. Also, provide training to a cohort of campus-wide assessment coordinators in developing sound assessment plans.

A comprehensive review of best practices and models used at peer institutions will be conducted. Based on this review, the processes and procedures currently in place for developing, reviewing and approving academic and co-curricular assessment plans will be updated. Then, on a rotating basis, all existing assessment plans will be refreshed to include student learning outcomes which clearly state the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire. Additional assessment plans will be developed where needed. Guidelines for well-written student learning outcomes will also be used to inform the process. In addition, it is critical to develop assessment plans which are meaningful to students, faculty and staff, align with program goals, and are manageable for and owned by faculty and staff. Identification of a team of campus-wide assessment coordinators will allow us to focus training on a group of individuals who will be working directly with program assessment plans.

2. Make assessment of student learning more visible through greater transparency.

In response to the need for greater transparency, the institution will review the *National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)* Transparency Framework to guide a critical analysis and improvement plan for the SDSU Website information on student learning.

3. Identify a software/management system for assessment data to build interactive data base/reporting mechanism.

The institution will conduct a review of currently available systems and compare features to meet our needs. A software program will be identified, purchased and implemented. We will build on current aspects of the institutional and assessment culture which already work well and connect to ways that make productive assessment activity visible and shared.

4. Renew and strengthen the university-wide commitment to assessment.

The assessment of student learning needs to become a regular and meaningful aspect of department, faculty and co-curricular leaders' work. Some of the indicators of the presence of an assessment culture include: clear general education goals, common use of assessment-related terms, faculty ownership of assessment programs, ongoing professional development, administrative support and encouragement of assessment, practical and sustainable assessment plans, systematic assessment, current student learning outcomes, comprehensive program review, assessment of co-curricular activities and assessing overall institutional effectiveness. Additional indicators include informational forums on assessment, inclusion of assessment in plans and budgets, celebration of successes, and responsiveness to proposals for new endeavors related to assessment (Weiner, W., American Association of University Professors). Perceptions of the current institutional culture related to assessment will be surveyed and once identified, targeted efforts can be proposed to work toward a more collaborative university-driven process.

5. Work toward a successful transition of assessment to the new Office of Planning, Decision Support and Assessment.

Even though the new office has been officially established, there is still much work to be done including the hiring and training of the new director of assessment, selecting and implementing assessment software, building a more robust assessment website and providing leadership and support for the work outlined in this application.

Commitment and Focus

- 5. What evidence demonstrates your commitment to and capacity for assessment of student learning (include things such as evidence of presidential and academic commitment to full participation, plans for involving people and groups to accomplish your goals, financial and other resource support, inclusion of the broader institutional community)?**

- Support of the President, Provost and Deans as evidenced by:
 - Establishment of the Office of Planning, Decision Support and Assessment. While SDSU has had an Assessment and Evaluation office since 1985, the establishment of the new office will afford access to more resources, expertise and increased visibility.
 - Current strategic plan, *Impact 2018: A Strategic Vision for South Dakota State University*, attends to promoting academic excellence through quality programs, engaged learners and innovative teaching and learning environments.
 - Commitment of funds from the Office of Academic Affairs for the duration of the Academy and for the purchase of “assessment software” such as *CampusLabs* or *TK-20* among others.

- Establishment of a 26 member Quality Improvement/Assessment of Student Learning Steering Committee with representatives from academic and non-academic units across campus. The steering committee will serve as the driving force toward meeting the goals outlined in the application. It is anticipated that sub-committees of the steering committee will be established to work on specific goals. Additional members from across campus will be joining the sub-committees to ensure the breadth of representation required to conduct a comprehensive and inclusive examination of student learning.

Potential Impact

6. What result do you want to achieve in the Academy? What is the potential for impact on the institution? On learning and teaching? On organizational culture?

Progress in addressing the identified needs and work toward achieving the stated goals for our Academy participation will move SDSU forward in enhancing academic excellence by building a stronger, more transparent assessment culture. We can identify how to support, recognize and reward the commitment to assessment and the resulting improvements. We will incorporate information about student learning outcomes into regular discussions and decision-making processes about programs and highlight specific examples of assessment results used for improvement. Spotlighting program improvements fosters faculty and staff interest in using data to improve and stimulate demonstrable changes in courses, in programs and in student affairs.

Another anticipated result of participating in the Academy is to expand faculty involvement in assessment by increasing faculty understanding and appreciation of how assessment can increase/positively impact student learning and how assessment can

increase their effectiveness as teachers and advisors by providing quantitative and qualitative data to inform change.

We will be able to report that faculty members in every department have established learning outcomes and the expected performance levels for all courses and the overall major. Results will be used to inform programmatic strengths and weaknesses related to student learning and shape plans for improvement.

Not only will faculty be more informed and involved with assessment, student affairs professionals will also further develop their commitment and expertise by infusing learning outcomes assessment across student affairs resulting in a **shared** emphasis on student learning.

Another result of participation is that SDSU will be managing and sharing assessment information in an online system. The institution will be in a position to better support continuous improvement by providing ready access to data. Such a system will enable SDSU to prevent unnecessary duplication, to maximize the usefulness of data and to more effectively demonstrate that it is making improvements in student learning.

7. How will your work in the Academy contribute to improvement of student learning at your institution?

The most important outcome of our participation in the Academy is indeed the improvement of student learning at South Dakota State University. As a result of working toward and achieving the goals stated previously, we can develop a more comprehensive and effective University Assessment Plan which will provide relevant and accurate information to improve student learning. Moreover, the work completed due to participation in the Academy will contribute to student learning by adhering to a more holistic perspective which accounts for both curricular and co-curricular learning.

By making assessment more visible and transparent through increased communication and the availability of accurate data and reports, the institution will be held more accountable for student learning. Stakeholders will have ready access to relevant information. By increasing the focus on assessment of student learning over the next 3-5 years, SDSU will also become known for its strong culture of assessment. The development of a stronger culture of assessment with a focus on continuous improvement will become a powerful engine for improved student learning.

Institutional Contact Information

Primary Institutional Contact Person for Academy Participation:

Mary Kay Helling

Name

Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs

Position title

South Dakota State University

Institution name

Administration Building Room 230, Office of Academic Affairs

Office address

Brookings, South Dakota. 57007-2098

City, State, Zip

605-688-4173

Office phone(s) and extension(s)

605-688-4443

Office fax

Mary.helling@sdstate.edu

Email address

Name and address to which the Commission should send invoices for Academy participation:

Vince Lahren

Name

Budget Specialist

Position title

South Dakota State University

Institution name

Administration Building, Room 230, Office of Academic Affairs

Office address

Brookings, South Dakota. 57007-2098

City, State, Zip

Vince.lahren@sdstate.edu

Email address

HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning

Before you email your *Academy Application* to academy@hlcommission.org, make certain it has been reviewed and approved by your institution's CEO. See Affirmation page.

Academy Application Affirmation

I affirm that the application emailed to academy@hlcommission.org presents our institution accurately, and that we agree, if admitted, to commit to meaningful and productive participation in the Academy for Assessment of Student Learning.



March 18, 2015

Signature of Institutional CEO

Date

David L. Chicoine, President
Printed/Typed Name and Title

South Dakota State University
Institution name

Brookings, South Dakota, 57007
Institution City, State, Zip

Include the affirmation in the electronic delivery of the application
or fax it to the Commission, attention Academy: 312.263.7462.