Open Pathway

Quality Initiative Institutional Proposal Template

The enclosed Quality Initiative proposal represents the work that the institution will undertake to fulfill the Improvement Process of the Open Pathway.

2/18/14

Signature of Institution’s President or Chancellor  Date

Eric W. Kaler, President

Printed/Typed Name and Title

University of Minnesota Twin Cities

Name of Institution

Minneapolis, Minnesota

City and State

Institutional Contact for Quality Initiative Proposal

Include the name(s) of the primary contact(s) for the Quality Initiative.

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Institution
Overview of the Quality Initiative

1. Provide a title and brief description of the Quality Initiative. Explain whether the initiative will begin and be completed during the Quality Initiative period or if it is part of work already in progress or will achieve a key milestone in the work of a longer initiative.

Title
Connecting the Dots of Undergraduate Student Learning Assessment

Background
Since the late 1990s, the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus has employed a flexible plan for assessing student learning that allows for different approaches and styles across its colleges and departments. The current plan evolved out of a previous assessment plan that was determined to be “thorough and sound” by the Higher Learning Commission’s 1995–96 visiting team, but also “not well understood, or broadly implemented across the campus.” The HLC’s peer evaluator report matched the conclusion that campus leadership at that time had reached: such an approach was unworkable on a campus of this size and disciplinary diversity. The University subsequently reworked the approach to be less prescriptive and more closely aligned with the campus’s decentralized academic and administrative structure.

As a result of this history, the Twin Cities campus has assessment-of-student-learning efforts that, while in many cases are well developed and highly effective, are somewhat disparate and disconnected from a central vision. The Twin Cities campus has identified an opportunity to reinvigorate its undergraduate education assessment efforts by more effectively connecting its wealth of assessment practices and integrating them with broader academic assessment and planning activities.

Brief Description
Generally, the Quality Initiative seeks to:

1. Reaffirm assessment of undergraduate student learning as a campus- and program-level priority.
2. Formalize current program-level efforts into a more consistent process that still allows colleges or programs the flexibility to tailor efforts to their disciplines and unique needs.
3. Connect program-level observations and discussions about student learning to campus-level data and discussions.
4. Focus attention toward (a) lessons learned from existing data and assessment activities and (b) actions taken to improve student learning.
5. Integrate the multiple streams of assessment information on campus to produce a more holistic understanding and deeper conversation about student learning at multiple levels of the institution.
Specifically, the Quality Initiative will use the University’s seven Student Learning Outcomes (approved by the University Senate in 2007) as the foundation for academic program-level student learning assessment. In addition, this initiative will connect the programmatic or department-level data with other existing campus-level assessment activities (such as the Writing Enriched Curriculum, the Student Experience in the Research University survey, and other evaluations) to help inform campus-level academic assessment and planning activities (such as external academic program review and the annual collegiate budget and compact process).

**Timeline**

This initiative is part of a larger institutional effort in which the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs has charged campus leaders to evaluate assessment-of-student-learning plans at the graduate, professional, and undergraduate levels. As noted, assessment-of-student-learning work has evolved throughout the history of the University, and will continue indefinitely; however, this initiative aligns that work with the short window of time preceding the University’s 2015–16 reaffirmation of accreditation visit. The intent of this initiative is to renew a commitment to educational achievement and improvement and to implement an ongoing assessment-of-student-learning process that continues long past the 2015–16 visit.

**Sufficiency of the Initiative’s Scope and Significance**

2. Explain why the proposed initiative is relevant and significant for the institution.

On the Twin Cities campus, undergraduate education is a top priority. Over the past 20 years University leaders have paid great attention to and made investments in improving the undergraduate experience at all levels, for all students. Focus on this priority was sparked by what had been historically low graduation rates relative to peer institutions. As a result, strategic initiatives have focused on improved academic advising, enhanced academic experiences including new writing programs and freshman seminars, changed norms and policy, and improved financial support to students. The recent remarkable improvements in persistence and graduation rates demonstrate that these initiatives have been successful. Also during this time, University leaders—while recognizing that undergraduate students’ education should reflect specific disciplines—took steps to ensure that holding an undergraduate degree from the University signals a set of shared experiences and learning. In 2007, the University Senate approved the following seven Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs):

**Student Learning Outcomes**

*At the time of receiving a bachelor's degree, University of Minnesota Twin Cities students:*

1) Can identify, define, and solve problems  
2) Can locate and critically evaluate information  
3) Have mastered a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry  
4) Understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies  
5) Can communicate effectively
6) Understand the role of creativity, innovation, discovery, and expression across disciplines

7) Have acquired skills for effective citizenship and life-long learning.

Presently, institutional mechanisms such as the academic program approval process require degree programs and individual courses to align content and teaching with at least one of the seven SLOs. However, not every course or program measures learning along these SLOs, and some courses and programs focus on disciplinary-specific departmental learning outcomes. This initiative asks faculty to align their current assessment work with the seven SLOs (if they are not already) and to report findings through an Annual Progress Report (APR) on Assessment of Student Learning for Undergraduate Programs.

The APR form guides program faculty through a continuous improvement process for meaningful assessment of student learning. Findings and discussions recorded on the form help guide collective actions for curricular change, development of enhanced learning opportunities for students, improvement of teaching, and the provision of more effective academic support services. Information to be collected through the form includes:

I. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)
   - Current University SLOs assessed during the academic year.
   - Links between departmental outcomes and the University’s SLOs.

II. Assessment Strategies for each SLO that was assessed during the reporting year
   - The measures used (at least one direct measure must be used for each student learning outcome).
   - Which and how many students were assessed and when.
   - Established proficiency levels (below, at, and above) for expected student achievement for each SLO.

III. Results for Each SLO Assessed
   - The percentage of students that demonstrate a minimum or higher level of proficiency (levels established by program faculty).

IV. Faculty Review of the Assessment Results
   - The process by which program faculty reviewed the results and decided on the actions and/or curricular revisions that were indicated by those results.
   - Conclusions about student learning for each SLO.

V. Revisions to Curriculum and/or Assessment Plan
   - Program changes, if any, that were implemented based on the findings of the assessments.
   - Revisions, if any, to the assessment plan, measurements, proficiency levels, or interpretation of SLOs.

VI. Future Plans
   - The long-range plan to assess all of the SLOs if assessing over a sequence of years.
The associate deans responsible for undergraduate education within each college will facilitate the charge and collection of the APR each spring. While most programs have existing assessment activities that can be aligned with the University’s seven SLOs, the APR requirement may introduce some programs to this type of assessment process for the first time. In these instances, central support will be available to assist program or department faculty. Furthermore, central staff will provide general instruction for interpreting the SLOs and for assigning an assessment level for each outcome.

3. Explain the intended impact of the initiative on the institution and its academic quality.

The initiative will enable campus leaders to leverage program-level observations, contrast these findings against campus-level observations to generate discussion, debate resulting conclusions, and consider what is needed to draw conclusions with greater confidence in the future. In short, the initiative is intended to foster rich, campus-wide conversations. Certainly, high-level assessment conversations already occur and have led to past education improvements—for example, the very successful Writing Enriched Curriculum program is the result of senior undergraduate education leaders’ assessment of undergraduate writing and subsequent adjustment of student writing requirements and teaching strategies. One specific impact of this initiative, however, is cementing the discussion of campus-level assessment findings into a more purposeful, routinized schedule for senior leaders.

Another impact is promotion of assessment discussions at the department or program level. While we know that analyses do occur at the programmatic level, these analyses frequently happen without the benefit of group conversation and debate about the validity, reliability, or findings of the data. We believe that assessment is most powerful as a group activity, and therefore the Annual Progress Report (APR) requires faculty to engage in assessment together in ways that may not have been the norm otherwise. In addition to existing assessment efforts and practices at the program level, we will expect departmental faculty to meet regularly with the specific purpose of translating their assessment work and findings through the APR.

This initiative reiterates the assessment of student learning as a campus value and a priority of the current University leadership. It sets the expectation for formalized discussions about assessment findings and linkages to improvement at the program and campus levels. We believe that increased discussion about assessment findings will lead to the identification of weaknesses of the data, and prompt the search for opportunities to acquire assessment data that better addresses the most important questions. This is particularly true when program faculty are required to submit these conclusions annually to college and central leadership. And, of course, these discussions about findings and ways to improve ultimately lead to better teaching and learning strategies, which aligns with the University’s decades-long push to dramatically and continually improve the undergraduate learning experience on the Twin Cities campus.
Clarity of the Initiative’s Purpose

4. *Describe the purposes and goals for the initiative.*

The purpose of the Twin Cities Campus Quality Initiative is to:

1. Reaffirm assessment of undergraduate student learning as a campus- and program-level priority.
2. Formalize current program-level efforts into a more consistent process that still allows colleges or programs the flexibility to tailor efforts to their disciplines and unique needs.
3. Connect program-level observations and discussions about student learning to campus-level data and discussions.
4. Focus attention toward (a) lessons learned from existing data and assessment activities and (b) actions taken to improve student learning.
5. Integrate the multiple streams of assessment information on campus to produce a more holistic understanding and deeper conversation about student learning at multiple levels of the institution.

5. *Describe how the institution will evaluate progress, make adjustments, and determine what has been accomplished.*

Quantitative indicators that we will use to evaluate the initiative’s success are:

- Academic program participation—The portion of academic programs that submit the Annual Progress Report (APR): The short-term goal (1 to 2 years) is 80% while the long-term aspiration is 100%.
- Authentic engagement—The portion of academic programs that demonstrate authentic program- or department-level engagement of faculty in discussing quality measures, analysis, and group reflection and considerations of adjustments. Although determining the level of authentic engagement is subjective, the APRs will capture the sense of commitment.
- Strength of measurements—The portion of academic programs that link valid measurements to the University’s SLOs. We will review each APR and, where necessary, work with academic program faculty to suggest stronger assessment practices.

Qualitative evaluation of the initiative will be based on the extent to which the Campus Steering Group (see item 7 for a description of this group) and program leaders can use the assessment information to draw conclusions. Examples include:

- Leaders will explore common themes that emerge from a program’s Annual Progress Report (APR), the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey, the Writing Enriched Curriculum, and other tools.
- Where there are strong contradictions—for example, between student-reported SERU data and faculty judgments reported in the APRs—leaders will determine whether students are learning along a particular outcome but are not fully aware of it, or whether students believe they are making more gains than they really are.
• Where strong positive and negative but inconsistent themes emerge within the APR reports, leaders examine the patterns that lie within and identify where to best focus attention.
• If the data show few strong conclusions or appear to stem from weak practices, leaders will channel more effort towards training and the development of better measurements.

To ensure regular review of the initiative’s progress, the vice provost for undergraduate education will hold a campus assessment discussion with the Campus Steering Committee each semester to review aggregated program and campus findings organized around each of the seven Student Learning Outcomes. From this meeting the vice provost will report to the Provost:

1. General campus conclusions about student learning
2. Steering-committee identified changes, decisions, or considerations that align with their conclusions about student learning
3. The Steering Committee’s levels of confidence in the validity and reliability of the data (information, processes, discussions, etc) used to draw conclusions
4. Adjustments that might lead to stronger assessment data in the future and ways to improve aspects of the campus assessment effort

If needed, the Campus Steering Committee may also charge a task force or subcommittee to further explore problems and identify alternative solutions.

Finally, the vice provost for undergraduate education will connect campus findings to the broader undergraduate agenda and work with the Provost to identify opportunities to bring key findings into the annual collegiate budget and compact process.

Evidence of Commitment to and Capacity for Accomplishing the Initiative
6. Describe the level of support for the initiative by internal or external stakeholders.

For this initiative to make a positive contribution to undergraduate education, support across campus is essential. This is particularly true of faculty support, as faculty are the content experts and those best positioned to make improvements based on assessment conclusions. Earning faculty support can be challenging, however, given the autonomous nature of faculty, the campus’s tradition of decentralization, and the fact that, at times, some faculty members distrust centrally-led initiatives.

To date, the level of participation and the positive attitudes expressed have exceeded expectations. For example, a Campus Steering Committee retreat in January 2014 included encouraging reports from the associate deans about the types of interactions they have been having with their department/program faculty. This initial show of support is attributable to a few strategic decisions. First, the Provost has signaled the initiative as a campus priority at the Steering Committee retreats and in several campus-wide communications. Second, the initiative has been presented as a positive exercise focused on improvement rather than one with the potential to drive resource reduction or program closure. Third,
while acknowledging the connection between assessment-of-student-learning work and accreditation, we have emphasized the initiative as a genuine effort to enhance undergraduate learning rather than a requirement from external forces. Finally, we have been mindful to show respect to our faculty by acknowledging them as the content—and in some cases, assessment—experts.

Other stakeholders include the University President and Provost, who have made this a priority and who have involved the executive team and vice presidents. The deans have shown terrific leadership so far, and units such as the Office of Institutional Research and the Center for Teaching and Learning are active partners.

Though we are encouraged, we stay cautiously optimistic. We note that the initiative’s success hinges on faculty participants who will choose to engage with the initiative because of its merits. We intend to be very careful in future communications to ensure that this initiative is understood to be a means to improve undergraduate education and not simply burdensome “homework” assigned by central administration.

7. Identify the groups and individuals that will lead or be directly involved in implementing the initiative.

Leadership for the initiative is delegated from Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Karen Hanson, to the Vice Provost and Dean for Undergraduate Education, Bob McMaster, though the Provost remains a visible campus participant and supporter. Vice Provost McMaster has assembled an Executive Team including himself, the Director of Undergraduate Assessment, the Director of Institutional Assessment, the Executive Director of Planning and Analysis, the Assistant Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, and the Deputy Chief of Staff to the Senior Vice President and Provost. This group meets several times a month to manage aspects of the initiative, including timeline, communications, process details, and general training and development objectives.

Vice Provost McMaster has also assembled a Campus Steering Committee composed of the Executive Team, each college’s associate dean for undergraduate education, and other undergraduate education leaders. These individuals are the University’s most senior leaders for undergraduate education, who have the authority and responsibility for the University’s undergraduate programs. This group includes the leaders who are driving the assessment conversations in each of the colleges and who engage with department/program faculty. This group will also discuss campus-wide measures in combination with Annual Progress Reports to draw conclusions and set the University’s undergraduate agenda.

Key to these campus-level conversations is the prior preparation and analysis performed by University staff. These include analysts in the Office of Institutional Research and the Office of Undergraduate Education who will package the various streams of information into findings and groups of findings organized around the University’s seven Student Learning Outcomes. The Vice Provost also involves the Vice Provost and Dean of Student Affairs, the Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Education, and the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning.
8. List the human, financial, technological and other resources that the institution has committed to this initiative.

As part of this initiative, the University created a Director of Undergraduate Assessment position to serve as a campus-wide resource on undergraduate assessment and to work with faculty, staff, and administrators to develop, implement, and coordinate assessment efforts of undergraduate student learning outcomes across the student experience. In addition, senior staff time has been allocated from the Office of Institutional Research, Provost’s Office, and the Office of Undergraduate Education.

Another human resource aspect of the initiative is the training and professional development of faculty and other undergraduate education personnel. Part of the responsibility lies with our Director of Undergraduate Assessment who, since starting in March 2013, has been aggressively engaging with staff and faculty in each of the colleges, departments, and programs. This task is also shared with the collegiate leadership who have taken the campus’ general assessment guidelines and then worked with their faculty to tailor the guidelines to the specific collegiate needs. In addition, the Center for Teaching and Learning provides workshops and instruction on assessment of student learning, integrating learning outcomes into the curriculum, and curriculum development to departments and individual faculty. Further support for faculty development related to assessing student learning is provided by the Office of Institutional Research and the staff of other vice provosts. The Director of Undergraduate Assessment is coordinating much of these efforts, including addressing the need to offer new workshops for faculty and staff related to course-embedded assessments and how to use the collected data to enhance student learning.

Since June 2013, the Executive Team has been exploring technology alternatives that will support the collection of assessment information from academic programs in a more standard fashion. The University is in the process of identifying a vendor to provide software tools for assessment management. Prior to implementation of a software-based solution, staff will collect the Annual Progress Report by hand but in a form that will allow the data to be uploaded into the system at a later date. The collected information will include outcome identification, assessment strategies linked to each of the University’s Student Learning Outcomes, results related to each outcome, the review process, conclusions, revisions to the assessment plan, and future plans.

**Appropriateness of the Timeline for the Initiative**

9. Describe the primary activities of the initiative and timeline for implementing them.

**Progress to Date**

- In the spring of 2012, newly appointed Provost Karen Hanson charged Vice Provosts McMaster and Schroeder to consider the current status and develop next steps for the continued advancement of the campus’ assessment of student learning efforts related to undergraduate and graduate education, respectively. Each vice provost developed a team to fulfill this charge.
Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Education Robert McMaster created two primary leadership groups: an executive team composed of central assessment leaders and a steering committee composed of senior campus undergraduate education leaders including the associate deans of undergraduate education. Throughout the 2012–13 and into the 2013–14 school years, Vice Provost McMaster has convened both groups, which began shaping general principles, communications, and initiative details.

In March 2013, the Vice Provost hired a Director of Undergraduate Assessment to serve as a campus-wide resource on undergraduate assessment and to work with faculty, staff, and administrators to develop, implement, and coordinate assessment efforts of the University’s Student Learning Outcomes across the student experience.

In the summer of 2013, the Undergraduate Assessment Executive Team and Steering Committee charged the collegiate units with assessing their respective assessment plans and identifying necessary adjustments. Collegiate associate deans shared with academic program leaders and faculty the expectation that academic programs submit an Annual Progress Report on Assessment of Student Learning for Undergraduates at the conclusion of each spring semester.

The Vice Provost held two campus retreats in June 2013 and January 2014 with associate deans for undergraduate education and other undergraduate education leaders. At these retreats, colleges reported the progress of their assessment efforts and discussed particular strategies and alignment with campus goals. At the end of both meetings, the group met with Provost Hanson, which served to reiterate the significance of this initiative as an institutional priority and allowed her to personally monitor the group’s progress. A third retreat is scheduled for June 2014.

Since being hired in Spring 2013, the Director of Undergraduate Assessment has engaged with staff and faculty in the colleges, departments, and programs to assess current efforts. During this same time, the Executive Team investigated software alternatives to aid data collection and began work to identify a preferred vendor.

**Next Steps**

In Spring 2014, undergraduate academic programs or groups of related programs will meet to revisit current assessment efforts and discuss how their findings and current efforts align with those required by the Annual Progress Report. These conversations will complement those that already take place as part of their ongoing assessment strategies. We are mindful that many other priorities compete for faculty time and will offer support for advance preparation and meeting facilitation so that discussions are focused and confined to a set period of time—particularly in departments that already commit a great deal of time to assessing student learning.
• At the conclusion of the Spring 2014 semester (and subsequent spring semesters), undergraduate academic programs or groups of related programs will submit their Annual Progress Report. The first round of reporting will be paper-based while future submissions will be done through an electronic system.

• The Assessment Executive Team, the Steering Committee, as well as collegiate leadership will review the Annual Progress Reports over the Summer of 2014. Staff in the Office of Undergraduate Education and the Office of Institutional Research will compile the data into meaningful themes for cross analysis with other campus-wide measurements such as the Student Experience in the Research University survey.

• The Vice Provost will convene an assessment of undergraduate education session to review the campus-wide assessment data organized around the seven Student Learning Outcomes. In addition to bringing forward lessons from the program-level conversations, the group will consider other streams of information about student learning, including the Student Experience in the Research University survey, evaluation processes for the Writing Enhanced Curriculum and Liberal Education Requirements, surveys of incoming students and recent graduates, collegiate assessment initiatives, and program-level accrediting processes. This session will include the Steering Committee and other senior-level undergraduate leaders. The group will report findings and conclusions from this session to the Provost.

• In Fall 2014, the Vice Provost and the Director of Undergraduate Assessment will meet with collegiate and assessment leaders to assess the current process. They will lead the Executive Team and the Steering Committee in conversations about opportunities to improve the assessment process.