*Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

DRAFT

**A FOCUSED INTERIM REPORT**

**Portland State University**

**Portland, Oregon**

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**Prepared by**

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*A Confidential Report Prepared for the*

*Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

*that represents the View of the Evaluator*

**Introduction**

Portland State University (PSU), located in Portland, Oregon, is the largest public four-year university in the state, with nearly 25,000 students. Portland State is a dynamic and rapidly-growing urban research university that has existed for a decade, until this past year, in a resource scarce environment. The faculty and administration have adapted well to the increasing demands of the growing student population, and indeed are nationally recognized for their University Studies program.

A full-scale accreditation evaluation was conducted at PSU in 2005, and the Commission on Colleges reaffirmed accreditation in 2006. Following reaffirmation, the university was asked to provide a focused interim report on Recommendation 2, regarding Standard 2, and this is an account of the site visit that follows that report. The one-person team visited Portland State University on October 11, 2007. Prior to that visit the evaluator received the complete interim report as well as copies of the 2004 self-study and the 2005 evaluators’ report. The on-site visit went smoothly with Portland State administrators, faculty, staff, and students providing very graciously of their time for a thorough review of the changes that have occurred over the past two years.

The evaluator would like to thank the Portland State University administration, faculty, staff, and students for the warm hospitality extended during the site visit.

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# Purpose of Visit

This focused interim visit was to provide a thorough review and evaluation of the progress of Portland State University with regard to Recommendation 2 of the fall 2005 Comprehensive Evaluation Report:

“2) The institution has made a serious and praiseworthy campus wide commitment to educational assessment for the long term. Implementation has begun, and in many cases has made enough effective progress that some departments have provided clear evidence of changes and improvements. Yet, institutional progress on educational assessment is mixed and inconsistent, with some departments much further along than others. It is recommended that units continue to search for appropriate assessment measures to determine the extent to which learning objectives are met. Implementation is incomplete and uneven, lacking a review mechanism to close the feedback loop. The Committee recommends that the institution develop review mechanisms to ensure that implementation of educational assessment is effective and leads to the improvement of teaching and learning over time and across all units (Standard Two and Policy 2.2).”

The evaluator’s approach to this recommendation was to look for three general outcomes:

1. are units continuing to search for appropriate assessment measures to determine the extent to which learning outcomes are being met, and is assessment becoming more consistent across programs;
2. has the institution developed a review mechanism to ensure that assessment implementation is effective, more even, and the feedback loop is being closed; and,

3) is there evidence of improvement to teaching and learning across all units?

# Assessment of Focused Interim Self-Study and Supporting Documents

The Portland State University Focused Interim Report was functional and served as an important reference to the activities the institution has undertaken since its 2005 visit. The document was accurate and clearly written. While supporting documentation, particularly updated materials of programmatic assessment activities, was limited, other documents that were requested or reviewed during the site visit were helpful in providing a foundation for the work of the evaluator, as were the interviews conducted to verify the content of the report.

Supporting documents requested and supplied included minutes from the Institutional Assessment Council (IAC) meetings; a report on assessment by the ASSIST team; an overview of the University Studies program; sample University Studies student portfolios and assignments, rubrics for evaluating the portfolios, and numeric data of average portfolio rating scores; a brochure on the Center for Academic Excellence offerings; organizational charts; a matrix comparing PSU University Studies goals with LEAP documents, Senate Bill 342, and the various institutional assessment activities and goals; the Student Portfolio Inventory Form; common criteria for program review ([www.portfolio.pdx.edu](http://www.portfolio.pdx.edu)); the assessment portfolio web pages ([www.programreview.pdx.edu/assessment](http://www.programreview.pdx.edu/assessment)); minutes and agendas of Assistant and Associate Deans Committee meetings; and, the 2007-2008 Bulletin and the Fall 2007 schedule of classes.

When the evaluator asked for specific copies of any institutional assessment policies it was noted that the culture of Portland State University is much more successful with ground-up, faculty-driven plans; since the assessment plan is currently under design by the IAC, institutional-level policies do not exist. Also, since only a portion of the records in the assessment portfolio had been updated since the 10-year site visit, when records of any additionally updated assessment activities at the programmatic level were requested, it became clear that the institution was struggling with the current reporting format and up-to-date records were not available for all programs participating in assessment activities. PSU is reviewing other formats, and considering the possibility of purchasing a commercial assessment reporting system to enable programs to report their assessment activities on-line more easily.

The basic manner of data collection for evaluation of the report included the review of supporting documents and interviews with a variety of individuals and committees across campus. These individuals included Interim President Michael Reardon; Provost Roy Koch; the Vice Provost for Instruction and Dean of Undergraduate Studies Shawn Smallman; the Director of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning Kathi Ketcheson; the Faculty-in-Residence for Assessment and ASSIST coordinator Yves Labissiere; the Assessment Associate in the Center for Academic Excellence Cheryl Ramette; the Director of Teaching and Learning Leslie McBride; the Research Analyst in the Office of Institutional Research and Planning Rowanna Carpenter; the Director of the Institute for Asian Studies and PI of an ACE/FIPSE grant project called Assessing International Learning Patricia Thornton; the Faculty Assessment Coordinator in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Paul Latiolais; and the Director of the University Studies program Sukhwant Jhaj. The evaluator also met with members of the Institutional Assessment Council (IAC), the Assessment Integration and Support Team (ASSIST), as well as holding an open meeting with the faculty senate.

# Analysis and Evaluation

## Assessment of University Studies

“The Northwest Commission on College and Universities expects each institution and program to adopt an assessment plan responsive to its mission and its needs. In so doing, the Commission urges the necessity of a continuing process of academic planning, the carrying out of those plans, the assessment of the outcomes, and the influencing of the planning process by the assessment activities.” (Policy 2.2 Educational Assessment)

The evaluator found evidence that Portland State University currently has what might be considered a four-part structure for assessing its programs in keeping with Policy 2.2. One part of the structure includes the University Studies (general education) program. The University Studies program has a very rich plan for assessing the teaching and learning environment which incorporates authentic assessment. Assessment is an integral part of the program’s approach to improving general education, and while primary assessment instruments have remained largely unchanged over the last two years, there is a significant amount of assessment occurring as a regular part of the process. As the Focused Interim report states, faculty “have collected and analyzed information about the courses, the student experience in those courses, and student learning and progress on the University Studies goals.”

Portland State begins this process with a freshman portfolio which includes a set of assignments outlining the types of writing to be included in the portfolio. Portfolios are selected and evaluated randomly for achievement of the four goals of the University Studies program using rubrics, and the data aid faculty teams as they work on course development. Recently, writing samples from Junior Cluster and Senior Capstone courses have been included in a pilot portfolio process. In addition, capstone courses are evaluated using electronic and paper course evaluation surveys which have led to changes in course syllabi. The program is currently piloting several survey instruments, as well as integrating the freshman Prior Learning Assessment and existing assessment activities with the goal of informing programmatic decisions regarding the curriculum within the general education program.

In spring of 2006 the Faculty Senate at Portland State created the University Studies Council. This group is charged with analyzing assessment data and evaluating the effectiveness of general education. In fall 2007, a half-time assessment coordinator was hired to assist the program in integrating University Studies assessment into program improvements.

## Programmatic Assessment

The second part of the Portland State assessment structure occurs within the departments and units. At the time of the 2004 site visit it was noted that there was variability in the effectiveness of assessment efforts across programs, including a lack of consistency in assessment activities occurring and the subsequent use of results to enhance student learning and improve instruction. Assessment reporting at that time was handled through an on-line reporting system. The evaluator found that the system was not being updated consistently and there is discussion across campus of finding a better way to track and report assessment data. While it appears that there is an internal conversation occurring about how assessment is being used, there is limited recorded evidence of programmatic assessment. Conversations with faculty support the assertion that all departments have developed learning goals, but that assessment is “uneven and sporadic” as one faculty member stated. By the same token, faculty are justifiably proud of the fact that the assessment that is occurring is authentic assessment, and that there is a definite culture of assessment developing on campus.

Of concern is the lack of systematic assessment efforts at the graduate level. The focus at Portland State has been on the undergraduate level since, with a few exceptions, most programs have specialized accrediting agencies. This is seen as meeting assessment needs at the graduate level. However, relying on specialized accreditation for graduate assessment can result in no assessment since specialized accreditation does not always evaluate at the graduate level. In addition, specialized accreditation is often focused on specific disciplinary goals and outcomes without appropriate attention paid to general knowledge and abilities that might be of importance in the program. Some areas, for example the Graduate School of Education, are looking at how specialized accreditation interfaces with the current campus activities centered around assessment, but without clearly defined institutional processes conducted on a regular basis, it can be difficult to incorporate assessment into overall planning and evaluation. As with the undergraduate program, while assessment may be occurring appropriately and continuously in some programs at the graduate level, without review and reporting mechanisms the evidence was unavailable. (2.B.1. and Policy 2.2)

In support of both programmatic efforts and institutional assessment efforts, the Assessment Integration and Support Team (ASSIST) was developed. This team is composed of an interdisciplinary group of graduate students with an interest in assessment, the Faculty-in-Residence for Assessment hired in the fall of 2006, and the Center for Academic Excellence Assessment Associate. The members of ASSIST, after some training, provide support to programs and units through conversations with faculty around student engagement and success, and particularly, how to develop learning outcomes, methods for measuring them, and effectively assessing units in discipline specific ways. For example, during the past year ASSIST met with nearly all of the departments in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS), the largest college at Portland State, to support them in conducting one full assessment cycle for the year. Concurrently, CLAS provided one faculty member a course release on a one-time basis to support the assessment process and work with ASSIST to help guide departments. While ASSIST has limited responsibility in working to make changes based on assessment data and thereby effectively “closing the loop,” this is an impressive program that provides a rich opportunity to train graduate students and incorporate them into the assessment process. As one student on the team expounded, Portland State is training graduate students who will soon be conducting assessment as members of the faculties of other institutions.

Commendation: The Assessment Integration and Support Team should be commended as a truly innovative approach to providing assessment support, while offering a unique and valuable experience to graduate students. The group should be applauded for its interdisciplinary approach and commitment to communication between students and faculty about programmatic assessment.

Concern: Through the efforts of ASSIST, the Faculty-in-Residence, and the CLAS Assessment Coordinator, it is clear that the administration is making an effort to support the assessment work in the departments. However, it appeared to the evaluator, and was confirmed by campus interviews, that the feedback loop and reporting process which provides the evidence that assessment activities are leading to the improvement of teaching and learning at both the graduate and undergraduate programmatic levels is still not as effectively as it should be. Assessment remains uneven and inconsistent with some departments providing rich examples of assessment activities and others appearing to have no assessment plans at all. In addition, or perhaps as a result of this, students might not be able to find the expected learning outcomes of their programs, and might be unaware that others who have completed their programs have achieved the desired outcomes. (Standards 2.B.2., 2.B.3., and Policy 2.2)

## The Institutional Assessment Council

In the winter of 2007, the third part of the assessment structure was developed. In response to Recommendation 2 of the 2005 Full-Scale Evaluation Report, the Provost formed the Institutional Assessment Council to institutionalize and support assessment practices, and to serve as the review and reporting mechanism for assessment on campus. The IAC was tasked with overseeing the implementation of assessment across the campus and designing a long term assessment strategy. The Council discovered early in its deliberations that faculty were asking for common undergraduate learning outcomes. After a review of current campus efforts, and “identifying commonalities and differences among the overarching learning outcomes expressed in earlier efforts on campus” as stated in the Focused Interim Report, the IAC extracted a set of learning outcomes that they believed reflected the priorities of the campus community. These recommended outcomes - Ethics and Social Responsibility, Appreciation of Diversity, Communication, Critical Thinking, and Internationalization - integrate nicely with those of the University Studies program and other programs on campus, and have been incorporated as a key feature around the Provost’s student success initiative.

In fall 2007, to ensure faculty participation and build support for the five recommended outcomes, the IAC held a campus-wide symposium focused around the Liberal Education & American Promise (LEAP) report which was the driving force behind the IAC activities. The Provost invited Carol Geary Schneider, President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, as the keynote speaker. Following the symposium, breakout groups of faculty were formed to focus on one of the five learning outcomes. These groups were asked to select and prioritize key terms related to the assigned outcome and use them as a basis to write a draft of the particular learning outcome. Following these discussions, a second breakout session was held to brainstorm ideas for a possible Carnegie Conversation scheduled to occur in January 2008. This conversation was being considered as a possible way the campus focus on how these learning outcomes relate to Portland State’s vision. According to the faculty interviewed this was an illuminating experience and they are looking forward to seeing the results of this effort. The ultimate goal is to have a set of institutionally accepted learning outcomes to propose to the Faculty Senate for adoption at the April 2008 meeting. The IAC will then focus on supporting the integration of these learning outcomes into programmatic assessment activities.

The IAC’s continuing responsibility is to find a way to develop an institutional structure to report and observe campus activities as a means of making assessment activities transparent across all programs. They see their role as facilitating a campus conversation that can institutionalize ways of sharing assessment activities, articulate existing consistencies among program assessment activities, reveal assessment activities that can be used in multiple ways, build values that can become an integral part of each program, and channel faculty assessment concerns in ways that support broad discussion. They see as one of their major challenges creating a campus culture that understands the relevance of assessment. The IAC has taken some big steps toward developing the mechanism for review, though they recognize that they still have a significant amount of work left to do to accomplish the task assigned to them.

## Piloting Learning Outcomes

In what might be considered the fourth piece in the assessment design, Portland State University was invited by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to participate in a grant project to measure student progress toward international learning and writing goals. The first round of data collection on the international learning outcome was completed in March 2007 with additional data collected in June. Initial results from the data are very intriguing. When the data analysis is complete, faculty in the International Studies and the University Studies programs will begin to look at their curricula and develop ways to integrate the international outcome into the teaching and learning occurring in both programs. The Principal Investigator noted that originally the institution had one outcome containing components of both diversity and international learning; however, evaluation of the pilot study data suggested this was not the appropriate structure. Hence the IAC divided the single outcome into two separate outcomes at the university level, one on diversity and one on international learning, a part of the five recommended university-level outcomes. The data collected as part of this grant should strengthen the institutional conversations surrounding the definition and adoption of the outcome on international learning.

Simultaneously, Portland State has been pilot testing assessment of writing, also a university-level outcome. As noted in the Focused Interim report, this assessment included student and faculty surveys, and assessment of student writing samples using the University Studies Writing Rubric. It is the intent of the faculty to use the data collected to understand student gains in writing in order to implement and institutionalize the core writing outcome through the work of the IAC.

# Conclusion

Portland State University is clearly moving in the right direction and asking the right questions about the quality of their programs. They recognize that there is a potential for campus transformation and are working toward greater curriculum coherence. Indeed, they have excellent examples of assessment within their own ranks in the University Studies program and in the pilot programs undertaken this past year. Faculty indicate that as an institution they are trying to make the connection between what they have done regarding assessment and where they are moving for the future. However, to effectively make that connection, there must be a regular expectation for all programs, graduate and undergraduate, to perform assessment on a regular cycle, and for documented evidence that the assessment is improving the teaching and learning environment. There continues to be a wide variation in the quality of assessment across campus, and the IAC as the review mechanism has not yet addressed this discrepancy.

# Recommendations

1. The institution has made a commitment to student success, and is working to incorporate assessment activities into that ongoing conversation. In addition, the IAC has made progress by recommending the five institutional outcomes. Yet the method of insuring that there is consistency and effectiveness of assessment across campus needs more work. The evaluator recommends that the institution continue to work toward clearly defined and systematic assessment in all programs, undergraduate and graduate, wherein there is updated and documented evidence that the feedback loop is being closed and that the teaching and learning environment is improving. (Standard 2.B., Policy 2.2)
2. Nearly all programs at Portland State University have developed learning outcomes. These learning outcomes should be made available to students. (Standard 2.B.2., Policy 2.2)