

July 30, 2004

Dr. Diane Nyhammer
Assistant Director
The Higher Learning Commission of the
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400
Chicago, IL 60602-2504

Dear Dr. Nyhammer:

This is to acknowledge receipt of the final Team Report of a visit to Arkansas Tech University. We have discussed the options for review and have agreed to use the Reader's Panel. Our formal response to the final Team Report is enclosed with this letter.

If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dr. Robert Charles Brown
President

1 Enclosure

cc: Dr. Steven Dempsey
Dr. David G. Fuller (Team Chair)
Mr. J. Michael Koon

Formal Response to the Evaluation Team Report

Background

Arkansas Tech University (ATU) underwent a comprehensive evaluation and site visit by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in October, 2000. The HLC team was very positive about ATU, citing twelve areas of institutional strength. However, like many other institutions in the last few years, ATU was found lacking in the area of student outcomes assessment. The team's concerns regarding outcomes assessment were addressed in the following comment in the final team report:

“The institution's implementation of student outcomes assessment varies greatly from department to department. Many programs are not at the stage where a meaningful feedback loop allows data to be interpreted and used to improve student learning.

The team considered ATU's assessment efforts from the perspective of NCA's matrix *The Levels of Implementation*, developed for academic institutions to use in evaluating their assessment programs. Based on assessment documents and interviews with various campus personnel, the team believes that ATU is slightly above level 1, or the beginning level, on that three level scale.”

Although ATU was accorded a ten-year accreditation, it was also recommended for a focused visit on assessment to take place in April 2004.

Institutional Response

Although Arkansas Tech University agrees with the focused team that assessment on our campus is not yet mature and we acknowledge that there will always be room for improvement, we do not believe the team fully appreciated the extent of the efforts and improvements that have been made in a relatively short, three-year time frame. The literature on assessment as well as anecdotal evidence from other institutions indicates that assessment is not something that can be rapidly implemented and brought up to full potential. It is our hope that the following information will help elucidate our contention that we are progressing at a greater pace than perhaps we are being given credit for in the current report.

Clearly, the focused team that visited ATU in April, 2004 observed significant positive progress in the area of assessment from the condition found by the comprehensive visiting team in 2000, as evidenced in the comments on pages 10 through 12 that identify numerous strengths relative to assessment and our assessment efforts. Additionally, on page 22, the team notes that “the efficacy of the assessment program has been **much improved** from its status on October 2000 when the comprehensive team visited campus. The annual assessment reports show that programs have identified outcomes and measures, and **quite a few show that a complete feedback loop has been completed**. Business, nursing, education and others have **developed functioning assessment plans and processes**. The institution has made **notable strides in formalizing the departmental reporting system for the assessment cycles**.” (emphasis added)

Even in the section of the report discussing evidence that demonstrates further institutional attention is required, the following comments can be found:

“The University has developed an effective means of recording program outcomes, measures, and results, which will provide all programs with an effective format and framework for identifying and reviewing multiple measures and tracking the results.”

“Another staff member, again reiterating the improved attitude about assessment, observed that the institution has not run into much resistance, that most people are interested and involved in assessment as compared to the earlier visit.”

“The team observed a general sense of acceptance and a willingness to deal with the inconsistencies in program assessment.”

“The assessment matrices developed in the last two years show that departments and programs are identifying multiple measures and beginning to collect and review information.”

“Faculty acknowledged the importance of their ownership of academic assessment, and saw this ownership manifested in their involvement with setting measures for assessment in the individual programs.”

“Faculty and staff noted that the administration provides financial and other support for assessment activities in the individual schools.”

Admittedly there were also negative comments by the team that led to their recommendation of a Monitoring Report due only three years prior to the next comprehensive visit. The issues recommended for the Monitoring Report will be addressed in the traditional matrix format below.

Page Number	Reference	Comments
Page 25, number 1	<p>Assessment Coordinator Load</p> <p>1) the program coordinator's assignment provides for an adequate amount of time in load to ensure appropriate attention to and support of the assessment program;</p>	<p>The duties of the coordinator of assessment activities are split between two individuals with recognized expertise in student learning assessment and data analysis. The skills of those individuals were recognized by the team as being "advantageous for the University and the development of its assessment program." Unlike many campuses where assessment is the anathema of faculty and staff alike, the team recognized this campus as much more positive. Comments such as "Another staff member, again reiterating the improved attitude about assessment, observed that the institution has not run into much resistance, that most people are interested and involved in assessment as compared to the earlier visit", "The team observed a general sense of acceptance and a willingness to deal with the inconsistencies in program assessment", "Faculty acknowledged the importance of their ownership of academic assessment, and saw this ownership manifested in their involvement with setting measures for assessment in the individual programs", and the team "heard staff and faculty remark about the prevalent and positive attitude about assessment and its role on campus." When this positive attitude and willingness to participate is part of the campus culture, it is much easier to implement assessment objectives and does not require the same time commitment necessary when the culture is combative and faculty and staff resist assessment implementation. These individuals, because of their expertise and the positive attitude that is prevalent on this campus, were able to bring this campus, in only three years, to the point that the team noted that "the efficacy of the assessment program has been much improved from its status on October 2000 when the comprehensive team visited campus."</p> <p>Clarification may need to be provided by the Higher Learning Commission regarding the meaning of "adequate amount of time in load" for the assessment program coordinators. Is it the amount of time spent focused on assessment activities that is most important?</p>

Page 25, number 2	<p>Adequate financial support</p> <p>2) that adequate financial support is identified and provided for the full implementation of the program;</p>	<p>The team noted a lack of financial support for the assessment activities after acknowledging that “faculty and staff noted that the administration provides financial and other support for assessment activities in the individual schools”. Additionally, the team made comments regarding a lack of planning for use of the assessment fee which will add approximately \$60,000 per year to the assessment efforts. Although we acknowledge that the use of the fee is not yet formalized, the team acknowledged that the assessment committee was working to decide how the fee should best be used to support assessment. It is not clear if the team took into consideration that the fee was only approved last fall (2003) and that this was the first time the additional monies were made available.</p> <p>It is also not clear that the team recognized the additional financial commitment that was made by hiring a Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, a position that was not in existence during the 2000 visit. Granted, the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment has reporting and other responsibilities that are not directly focused on assessment. However, the Director does provide assessment support and analysis for various departments and individuals on campus. Additionally, many of the reporting functions performed by the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, relieve others from having to perform those functions allowing them to focus more of their time on assessment activities.</p>
Page 25, number 3	<p>Assessment Committee</p> <p>3) the assessment committee’s function, reporting relationships, and membership are significantly improved and clearly defined and communicated to all campus constituencies;</p>	<p>The assessment committee was charged “to build on our current efforts by re-examining extant practices, recommending new and different strategies where you think change is warranted, and providing counsel aimed at improving and enhancing the effectiveness of all our assessment practices.” The assessment committee’s membership and function are listed in the Faculty Handbook, which is provided to all faculty, and it is on the University web site for broader access. The function, as listed in the Faculty Handbook is “to develop, implement, oversee, and maintain assessment procedures in line with criteria set forth by the state, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and various specialized</p>

		<p>accrediting agencies.”</p> <p>The members consist of: The Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Dean of Graduate Studies, who serve as co-chairs, the Vice President for Student Services or his/her designated representative, the Vice President for Administration and Finance or his/her designated representative, the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Registrar, faculty representing each of the schools, and a student appointed by the Vice President for Student Services. The membership was carefully considered to assure representatives from all the major university constituencies including academic support units and student representatives. There is indication in the team report that perhaps the assessment committee should be more academically focused. However, of the 16 members of the committee, 10 are faculty members. There also seems to be a concern from the visiting team with the fact that the assessment committee is also interested in “institutional effectiveness” and a belief that the assessment committee should only focus on “academic assessment”. We have labored under the impression, perhaps mistakenly, that these are not mutually exclusive.</p> <p>The team noted a perceived lack of communication between the assessment committee and the faculty senate. However the team failed to note that the committee contains at least two members of the faculty senate who may not have been present during their scheduled meeting. Considering the representative membership, it is difficult to determine how the membership could be significantly improved.</p> <p>This is another instance where Higher Learning Commission assistance may be needed to help us understand how the assessment committee’s function, reporting relationships, and membership should be “significantly improved” to make our assessment program better and avoid another focus visit.</p>
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<p>Page 25, number 4</p>	<p>Two complete years</p> <p>4) all academic programs provide documentation that data have been gathered, analyzed, and reviewed for any necessary program changes for at least two complete years;</p>	<p>The vast majority of the University’s programs already have completed two complete cycles of data collection and analysis. This was completed within three years of the last comprehensive visit that led to the focused visit. As noted by the team “the annual assessment reports show that programs have identified outcomes and measures, and quite a few show that a complete feedback loop has been completed. Business, nursing, education and others have developed functioning assessment plans and processes. The institution has made notable strides in formalizing the departmental reporting system for the assessment cycles.”</p> <p>It is particularly important to note that education was mentioned as having “functioning assessment plans and processes”. During the comprehensive visit, education was specifically identified as severely lacking. The comprehensive team, referring to the school of education stated: “A chair reported that prior data were irrelevant to the new process. The chairs did not report ways in which assessment informed curriculum. It is not clear to the team therefore how the school will use lessons learned from prior data to enhance the new system. While the school collects data and has it available, the team questions its effective use.” The fact that this school was singled out as severely lacking three years ago and now is specifically named as an example of having functioning assessment plans and processes, is yet another indication of how far this institution has come with its assessment program within a three-year time span. The majority of our departments have completed two complete cycles and will complete the third during the fall semester of this year. The few departments that do not have two complete cycles have now completed at least one and will have completed the second during the fall semester.</p>
<p>Page 25, number 5</p>	<p>General Education</p> <p>5) the General Education program is assessed with multiple measures and the data reviewed and the</p>	<p>Again noting that everything could not be implemented immediately, the team noted in the report that the assessment committee had discussed the issues with general education and agreed to provide a review in the next cycle. Starting last year, the CAAP results, which had been shared only as a top level comparison, were provided to all departments in the form of an</p>

	<p>results communicated and used for program improvement where needed;</p>	<p>analysis. The analysis took the CAAP scores down to the sub-score level and provided comparisons at that level between and among university departments. Those analyses were conducted locally and feedback from the participants at various meetings where the results were displayed, generated new analyses that were then provided back to the groups. Currently, the University has acquired additional analyses from CAAP that addresses specific subject areas. Those have already been provided to the Deans and other upper level administrators. Once the fall semester begins, so that our regular faculty are back at work, the analyses will be provided to the assessment committee and all other campus constituencies for discussion and a determination of how these results might be used to improve our academic programs.</p> <p>The additional CAAP analyses are made possible, in large part, because of the financial commitment of the addition of the position of Director of Institutional Research and Assessment.</p>
<p>Page 25, number 5</p>	<p>AVTI Assessment</p> <p>6) an academic assessment program is implemented at Arkansas Valley Technical Institute;</p>	<p>The AVTI campus has organized its assessment committee, provided them with initial training, and they have begun to identify educational outcomes that will be the basis of their assessment activities. The relationship with this campus is maintained by having the chair of the AVTI assessment committee serve as a member of the University Assessment Committee. This fall, the Center for Teaching and Learning is already scheduling classes to provide professional development for the committee members as it relates to assessment. The resources generated from the assessment fee, as well as other resources in the various departments, will be used to assure that assessment can be conducted on the AVTI campus as well.</p>