

Chapter 2

METHODS OF ASSESSMENT AND SELF-EXAMINATION

The Earlham College Assessment Committee

The requirements of Earlham's accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, have been a major impetus for developing a more intentional, college-wide approach to assessing student learning outcomes. NCA required us to include a plan for assessing student outcomes as part of our 1993 self-study for re-accreditation, and that plan was a major component of the college's last self-study document.

Following re-accreditation, the college created a standing Assessment Committee and gave it the following charge:

The Assessment Committee is responsible for the measurement of student learning outcomes in on-campus academic programs as well as our libraries, off-campus programming, Career Services, Athletics, Service Learning, Campus Ministry, Student Activities, and so forth. The Assessment Committee will provide advice in terms of what information to collect for assessment purposes, provide support in actual data collection activities, interpret and archive collected data, decide how to distribute the information (e.g. make it available for program improvement, marketing, NCA re-accreditation, etc.), periodically review and improve the ongoing assessment process, communicate to the student body the reasons for outcomes assessment and solicit their cooperation, cooperate with the Curricular Planning Committee in assessing general education learning outcomes, and advise academic units on how to meet the assessment requirements of their five-year unit review.

The committee's membership includes two faculty members, two students, the Director of Institutional Research, the Dean of Student Development, the Associate Academic Dean, and the Associate in Assessment.

A commitment to assessment and self-examination implied by the formal charge to the Assessment Committee is now well rooted in the college's culture and educational activities. Earlham's approach to assessing student outcomes focuses at present on assessing what students learn through the formal educational program. We have divided this larger commitment to self-examination into two main evaluation efforts: assessment of general education outcomes and assessment of outcomes within majors (5).

Assessment of General Education Outcomes

As the 1993 assessment plan was developed, the faculty approved a list of 11 goals for general education, subsequently revised to a list of 15 such goals. Those goals continue to guide our Assessment Committee, and its parent body, the Curricular Policy Committee, in efforts to develop effective and efficient strategies for assessing the outcomes of our general education program.

One strategy for such assessment is to survey current students and alumni about their experiences and overall satisfaction with general education. Our Office of Institutional Research (25) conducts a number of surveys on a regular basis. These currently include the UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey (9, 10), the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) *Your First College Year* survey (32), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (24), a survey administered to seniors and alumni through the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS) (23), an Earlham-based alumni survey (4). In addition, the Admitted Student Questionnaire (ASQ) is administered through Earlham's Admissions Office (3).

The National Survey of Student Engagement is particularly useful for Earlham's assessment purposes. Administered to first and fourth year students at a wide variety of colleges and universities, its questions have a demonstrated correlation to student learning. Earlham participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement in 1999, 2000, and 2001; and the college has now decided to participate every three years, or three times during each ten-year re-accreditation cycle.

The data collected from these surveys have been particularly useful inputs to our ongoing assessment efforts, and they have already influenced our educational programs in significant ways. For example, we found that we need to provide our students with additional vocational guidance, and with the support of the Lilly Endowment, we have now established a vocations program that has strengthened our Career Center and provided students with additional and much needed programming. We also identified "strengthening pathways to vocation" as one of ten strategic goals for the next five years.

Our general education assessment efforts, along with a widespread belief that our existing program of general education was hurting our recruiting and admission efforts, gave impetus to faculty deliberations that led to the adoption of a new set of general education requirements. During the spring semester of 2002, the faculty approved a broad framework for a new program of general education that had been drafted by a subcommittee of the college's Curricular Planning Committee. One example of how assessment data influenced the specific elements of this new program is that we found evidence that our students were not achieving the desired levels of competence and confidence in quantitative reasoning skills and in using quantitative data to bolster arguments and test theories and hypotheses. As a result, the new general education program was designed to include a quantitative reasoning component, which the previous program of general education did not have.

Once the faculty had approved a broad outline of a new general education program, implementation committees worked over the summer of 2002 to develop specific details and components of the program and to conduct feasibility studies. The faculty gave formal approval to the new set of general education requirements during the fall semester of 2002 and the program has been implemented with the start of the 2003-2004 academic year. An important component of the new general education program is a mandate for extensive ongoing assessment to be followed by extensive, formal reviews of the new program in two and five years.

Meanwhile, the Assessment Committee has been proceeding with the development of specific strategies for assessing student accomplishment of the college's general education goals. In the spring of 2001, the Assessment Committee asked 40 students (ten in each class year) to submit copies of all the work they did in all of their courses that semester. A rubric for evaluating these student portfolios against the elements of general education was subsequently developed with the assistance of Dr. John Nichols of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. A second set of portfolios from 40 different students was collected in the spring of 2002 and analyzed in the summer of 2002 by a subgroup of the Assessment Committee. While the analyses of student portfolios provided evidence that our students are, indeed, showing growth in relation to some of our general education goals, they also revealed that other goals might need to be more precisely stated because of the difficulty in assessing them rigorously.

Beyond this very broad assessment of general education, both reviews of the student portfolios concluded that the faculty need to reconsider the degree to which our general education goals adequately capture our actual general education aims. The subcommittee of the college's Curricular Planning Committee that developed the new general education model during the 2001-2002 academic year made this same point. As a result, the Curricular Policy Committee has agreed to undertake a review of our goals for general education now that the new program of general education has been implemented. To better prepare faculty for assessing the new program of general education, one faculty member from each division recently attended an Independent Colleges of Indiana workshop on "Accreditation and Assessment Strategies for Institutional Effectiveness" that was held at the Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology.

Our implementation of a new program of general education and a review of our general education goals are parts of a cycle of assessment and curricular development. The existence of the 1993 general education goal statement and a subsequent revision of that statement in 1999 provided considerable impetus for developing our new program of general education, which will, in turn, occasion a further examination of the goals statement. It must be emphasized that the spirit of Earlham's 1993 general education goals statement remains intact in the new general education model; it is the manner of articulating those goals that is likely to be revised now that we have a new model of general education. And, it is worth emphasizing that our commitment to assessment and evaluation fostered an environment that was conducive to the major overhaul of our general education program (14).

Another positive aspect of our assessment process has been the commitment to evaluate our assessment and evaluation strategies. As an example, when the student portfolio project was evaluated, the Assessment Committee determined that it was neither effective enough in identifying student outcomes nor efficient enough to justify continuation. Therefore, the Assessment Committee consulted with Dr. Richard Stroede, Dean at Defiance College, about a “course-embedded model” for assessing general education. Not unlike the model employed at Alverno College, the Defiance College model rests upon the demonstration of student achievement of college-wide general education goals within specific course activities. We are optimistic about this approach since it holds the promise of helping faculty to view assessment as integral to the teaching and learning processes. This approach to general education outcomes assessment was piloted in the spring of 2003 in several courses, and it is seeing expanded use during this current academic year.

Assessment within the Major

As part of Earlham’s 1993 assessment plan, each major program, whether disciplinary or interdisciplinary, was asked to develop an assessment strategy and to present evidence of student learning outcomes in its five-year review (required of all departments and programs as part of the college’s routine academic planning). The approaches taken by departments and programs vary considerably, but generally include use of a comprehensive examination required of senior majors in every academic program (5).

Comprehensive examinations take diverse forms. Some are actually written exams administered to all majors on a single day. Some involve intensive individual research over a span of time. Others entail artistic productions or public presentations. Some include oral examinations either by Earlham faculty or outside reviewers, while others ask seniors to undertake written reflections about their educational experiences and to link these observations to their career interests.

Departments and Programs are also asked to report on what their majors are doing after graduating from Earlham. Some departments and programs have surveyed their alumni to learn about both satisfaction with their Earlham education and the adequacy of their learning in their post-graduate experiences. As part of their five-year reviews, each department and program is asked to review all of the information it has available about student outcomes and, where appropriate, to make modifications in its curriculum. The assessment techniques developed by each department and interdisciplinary program provide a basis for routinely evaluating and substantially strengthening our majors.

Finally, we are in the early stages of developing a new alumni outcomes initiative, designed to gather additional information about the careers and lives of our graduates. The distinctive feature of this initiative is that it seeks to integrate both the gathering of information and the use of this information throughout the college’s operations. It will entail a systematic and coordinated effort to develop a database of information about our alumni drawing on the efforts of Institutional Research, Alumni Affairs, Public Affairs, Career Services, Admissions, and the

teaching faculty. For example, we have recently enrolled in the National Student Clearinghouse Degree Verify Program that allows us more complete information about alumni who have subsequently earned graduate degrees at another institution. This alumni outcomes database not only will help us in the assessment of the quality of our educational program but also will address important goals to which we have made commitments in our strategic plan: improving our national visibility, recruiting more new students, helping current students find pathways to vocation, and increasing the level of financial support Earlham receives from its alumni.

Institutional Research

Over the past five years, Earlham has significantly strengthened its institutional research capabilities. We have added a full-time Associate Director to supplement a regular faculty member who serves as Director of Institutional Research. This position is currently located in the President's budget while the college considers the most appropriate regular budgetary unit in which to place the position. We have also joined the Higher Education Data Sharing project (HEDS), a consortium of 138 colleges and universities that share a broad range of institutional data with one another.

The college's institutional research includes studies related to our admissions efforts, Earlham alumni, the curriculum, faculty issues, finances, retention, and student learning and other educational outcomes. The many examples provided throughout this self-study document illustrate that we have developed the habit of using analyses of institutional data to guide our planning and decision making processes.

One on-going challenge for the college is to make more effective use of data and information captured in Banner, the college's information management system. Two significant steps we are taking in that direction are increased training of college personnel in their use of Banner and the acquisition of Brio to improve data accessibility.

Strategic Planning

In the fall of 2001, President Bennett appointed a Strategic Planning Committee composed of four administrative faculty, four teaching faculty, one staff member, and two students. The central question for this committee was to determine how the college could better serve its mission and achieve its educational goals. The committee was charged with:

- gathering data from Earlham's ongoing study, research, and planning efforts as well as external information sources;
- reviewing and assessing the gathered data with the aim of identifying the college's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats;

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- consulting with a broad range of the college's constituencies, including faculty, students, staff, alumni, the Board of Trustees, the Richmond community, and others; and
- identifying a set of priorities among our programmatic, staffing, and facilities needs.

The committee examined survey data on current and potential students (inquirers, applicants, and enrollees). These survey data allowed the committee to look at Earlham in terms of how we perform relative to other colleges and universities. The committee also examined comparable data about Earlham and other colleges and universities obtained through our memberships in the Higher Education Data Sharing consortium, the Great Lakes Colleges Association, and other national educational organizations.

The committee also drew on the results of earlier planning efforts. It reviewed the college's Repositioning Plan (approved by the Board of Trustees in February 1999), the college's Retention Plan (May 2001), and reports submitted by three aspirations working groups. The working groups responded to the challenges posed by President Bennett in his inaugural address: on learning and technology, on diversity, and on the college's affiliation with Quaker organizations and constituencies.

As charged, the committee engaged in broad consultation with important constituencies. Groups of students, faculty, and staff were invited to describe what they saw as the college's strengths, its weaknesses, and the ways they would like to see the college be different in five to ten years. The committee also had similar conversations with members of the Board of Trustees and leaders of the Richmond and Wayne County communities. In response to our invitation, many alumni and parents wrote thoughtful letters answering these same questions.

The committee's initial findings were organized and presented in two forms for community review. First, major elements of the college's mission and operations as currently functioning were described in a series of White Papers. The community was invited and encouraged to read these White Papers and to correct and amend them so they would be as useful as possible in preparing the final draft of the Strategic Plan (29). Second, the committee organized its findings about the college's strengths and weaknesses into an importance-performance matrix that assessed Earlham's performance on many key criteria along two dimensions: how *important* various aspects of a college or university program are to students (both current and prospective), and how well students judge Earlham's *performance* on delivering each item. This importance-performance matrix was widely shared with members of the campus community, and much discussion followed. In retrospect, we believe the campus-wide discussions of the importance-performance matrix were a key aspect of the strategic planning process – helping members of the Strategic Planning Committee to focus as objectively as possible on the college's key challenges and to prepare a set of commitments that respond to these challenges.

Chapter 6 of this self-study document offers a more detailed description of the findings of the Strategic Planning Committee. It will detail what we concluded were the college's key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and it will also present and describe the commitments the college community has agreed to as an outcome of the strategic planning process.

NCA Self-Study

To prepare for re-accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the President named a Self-Study Coordinator, Sara Penhale, Associate Professor of Biology and Science Librarian, and established a Self-Study Committee, consisting of four additional longstanding members of the teaching faculty – Nelson Bingham, Professor of Psychology and Director of Institutional Research, Bob Southard, Professor of History and Associate Academic Dean, Chris Swafford-Smith, Professor of Spanish and Hispanic Studies, Liffey Thorpe, Professor of Classics and a former Associate Academic Dean, and Larry Stimpert, Professor of Economics and Business at Colorado College and 2002-2003 ACE Fellow at Earlham. Not only have all of the members of the Self-Study Committee served in a variety of teaching and administrative capacities, but they also bring a rich array of perspectives on the college based on what is, together, more than 100 years of experience at Earlham. The committee was assisted in its work by Mary Ann Weaver, Associate Director of Institutional Research.

So that the Self-Study Committee might make the best possible use of the extensive work of the Strategic Planning Committee, two members of the Strategic Planning Committee – Sara Penhale and Bob Southard – were asked to serve on the Self-Study Committee. The Self-Study Committee relied heavily on the many assessment processes and review procedures already in place, and we borrowed heavily from the assessment and evaluation work that had already been done by many of the college's standing committees. These standing committees are composed of teaching and administrative faculty, students, and in some cases, hourly employees. Thus the efforts of all campus constituencies have formed the basis of our self-examination. Relying on groups already working together and on materials gathered as routine parts of Earlham's operations met our desire to conduct our self-study in an efficient manner, as well as reinforced the college's appreciation for and continued use of our ongoing assessment and evaluation practices.

Key among the documents considered by the committee were: the Strategic Plan (29) and the accompanying background work, five-year and external reviews of academic departments and programs, annual reviews of administrative units (a new practice initiated for this self-study effort but intended to continue annually), and reports from standing college committees, task forces, and working groups. For many current policies and practices, both academic and administrative, we made use of the information posted on the Earlham College Website (17). Over the last ten years, the college's Website has developed into an important and highly effective tool for facilitating our work together and for informing the public about the essential features of Earlham's mission, ethos, operations, and activities.

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With so much information, analysis, and assessment material already available, members of the Self-Study Committee were able to complete most of our work using existing material. In one key area, however, we solicited further information: the current transition to a new program of general education. For this, we requested additional assistance from the Associate Academic Dean and used materials from the college's Curricular Policy Committee. The Self-Study Committee was also careful to review progress made in addressing three specific concerns identified during the last re-accreditation team's visit in 1993.

The college community reviewed drafts of sections of the self-study document and provided feedback to the Self-Study Committee through a series of conversations. These conversations with individuals, departments, offices, and standing committees served several purposes: to refine the document to better reflect Earlham at present and to continue our cultivation of a culture of assessment and evaluation. The entire report was posted to the Web so that faculty, staff, and students could review it and make additional comments. Presentations about the self-study process and the report were given twice to the Faculty Meeting in the spring of 2003 as well as to the Board of Trustees in May 2003. The report was further reviewed in Fall of 2003 by all campus constituencies: students, Employee Council, teaching and administrative faculty, and the Board of Trustees.

We intended this review process to provide an opportunity not only to acknowledge how we as an institution of higher education can more effectively pursue our educational mission, but also to celebrate the achievements of Earlham College over the past ten years. Further, our self-study report will stand alongside the Strategic Plan as an additional tool for sharpening our efforts to move the college forward over the next ten years.