

Sense of the Senate in Regard to Assessment and Accountability

The faculty of the State University of New York has always supported both assessment and accountability. Both are a routine part of academic life and faculty responsibilities. In fact, the faculty has participated through the University Faculty Senate and the Faculty Council of Community Colleges with System Administration (specifically, with the Office of the Provost) to set up system-wide programs of assessment (GEAR—General Education Assessment Review) and accountability (Campus MOU—Memorandums of Understanding). These have been among the most recent successful examples of how the faculty and administration can cooperate to the benefit of SUNY.

The primary focus of the faculty has always been the quality of its academic programs. This campus-based responsibility for academic programs has been consistently understood and accepted by the University Faculty Senate, the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, System Administration, and the Board of Trustees, most evident recently in the programs of General Education. While there are system-wide learning objectives for ten categories of general education programs, the actual academic programs that serve to meet the requirements for general education as specified by the Board of Trustees Resolution 98-241 vary by campus. In fact, it is this very diversity of programs (general education and others—e.g., majors and various professional programs) that is the great strength of the SUNY system.

Consequently, it seems clear that in the six or more years in which this discussion about system-wide testing (now called “value-added assessment”) has occurred, the faculty has consistently argued that since academic programs are determined by the individual campuses, any assessment of these programs must be similarly campus-based. It seemed evident that System Administration agreed with that view when it worked with the University Faculty Senate and the Faculty Council of Community Colleges to establish GEAR to provide system-wide review of campus-based programs assessing general education. All current evidence suggests that the results of this process have been quite successful. Similarly, the campus MOUs were conceived within the context of perhaps the single most important contribution of the Provost: Mission Review. Mission Review is an explicit statement of the differences that do and should exist among the campuses of SUNY. Each campus is encouraged to find its own academic niche within SUNY and to provide programs relevant to its uniqueness. The campus MOU asks the campus to spell out precisely what its specific educational mission is and then requires it to demonstrate how well it has carried out that responsibility.

Looked at from this perspective, it is evident that there already exists within SUNY several mechanisms that speak to the issues of assessment and accountability: GEAR and the Campus MOU. These mechanisms provide for system-wide oversight of campus-based responsibilities. In addition, professional accreditation (as specific as those required by disciplinary professional societies or as general as required by the Middle States Higher Education Commission) also provides a mode of assessment and

accountability, though again either at the department/college/school level (disciplinary accreditation) or at the campus but not the system level (Middle States).

Thus, if the intent of the present initiative on system-wide (or value-added) assessment is to serve primarily as a way of enhancing the quality of academic programs, the mechanisms to do so currently exist (GEAR, MOU, and professional accreditation). It would certainly be appropriate, and in keeping with the concept of “value added,” to assess the degree to which campuses continually improve their academic programs over time. In that way, campuses are compared against themselves rather than against other campuses that have a different mix of students, clearly different academic programs, and different goals for their students. If the current GEAR process and the MOUs are perceived to be inadequate to the task of value-added assessment, though we do not see why that should be, the faculty governance bodies will gladly work with System Administration to modify these two existing processes that have already been accepted by both the faculty and System Administration to ensure the necessary campus-based responsibility for assessing its academic programs and system-wide need for accountability without creating a new set of mechanisms that the faculty opposes on academic, pragmatic, and fiscal grounds.

Adopted by the SUNY University Faculty Senate, October 25, 2003 at the 135th Plenary session at the State University College at Oswego.