Prologue

The purpose of this visit was two-fold: (1) to fulfill the requirements of the reporter's attendance of the WASC Assessment Leadership Academy, and (2) to provide useful information and feedback for UHH's administration and faculty who are themselves grappling with making assessment and accreditation “meaningful.”

Since the latter goal is of greater, tangible benefit for the reporter's institution, this report is concentrated on documenting insightful comments from the CSUSM professionals the reporter had the opportunity of meeting.

The following individuals are to be recognized for helping to facilitate this document:

Gabriela Sonntag, Library (gsg@csusm.edu)
Facility Fellow for Planning and Accreditation

Dr. Linda Shaw, Sociology (lshaw@csusm.edu)
Program Assessment Committee Chair

Dr. Joanne Pedersen (pedersen@csusm.edu)
Associate Director for First-Year Programs

David Barsky (djbarsky@csusm.edu)
Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs—Academic Programs

Jennifer Jeffries (jjeffrie@csusm.edu)
Associate Vice President for Planning and Accreditation

Dr. Marie Thomas, Psychology (mthomas@csusm.edu)
Learning Outcomes Assessment Fellow

Dr. Sharon Hamill, Psychology (shamill@csusm.edu)
General Education Assessment Coordinator

Catherine Cucinella, Literature and Writing (ccucinel@csusm.edu)
Interim Director, General Education Writing Program

Background Information

California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM) is a relatively new institution, which was founded in 1989. At the time, the student population was primarily Anglo-White, with only 14.9% of students hailing from minority backgrounds. By 1990, minority enrollment stood at 37.3%—a significant shift in demographics, which coincided with a large disparity between white (65% continuation rate) and minority students (57%) in terms of first-year retention (EER 2009, p. 29).
According to CSUSM’s WASC Educational Effectiveness Report (EER) of 2009, the institution has grown considerably. At inception, CSUSM only offered upper division coursework given the concerns voiced by the two local community colleges—Palomar College and Mira Costa Community College.

CSUSM’s first published academic master plan in 1993 cited 9 Bachelor of Arts degrees and 3 Bachelor of Science degrees; by 2009, the number had grown to 27 bachelor degree programs, 10 master degree programs, 5 teaching credentials, 4 advanced credentials and 1 doctoral program (EER 2009, 9.4).

A WASC Visiting Team in 2007 issued an action letter identifying the improvements CSUSM needed to accomplish for its next Capacity and Preparatory Review:

- “. . . incorporate direct assessment of learning more fully into all . . . academic and co-curricular programs,”
- “. . . continue to develop ways to assess the impact of its co-curricular programs on the formation of graduates,”
- Use evidence, in the form of achievement data, to “inform program improvement” more consistently across the University, and to integrate a focus on assessment with plans for faculty and staff development.” (EER 2009, p. 10)

In response, CSUSM embarked on major changes to undertake reform of both Program Review and General Education.

**Program Review**

Around 1999/2000, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences put out a call for Program Learning Outcomes. Many rushed to formulate and submit them, then the process petered out. The school then turned to Peggy Maki, formerly a Senior Scholar and Director of Assessment at the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and Associate Director of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education. After a series of workshops and her direct review of all pertinent documents, CSUSM embarked on a project of publishing Program SLOs—this became the impetus for the initial birthing of assessment on campus.

However, the 2009 EER notes that one of the major problems the campus faced was in program planning, in that there appeared to be a “disconnect between the academic planning process and the campus’s budgeting process” (p. 5). Some of the irregularity in the administration of the process apparently stemmed from the shift from its emphasis on liberal learning towards serving as a “comprehensive university meeting regional needs” (p. 5).

It was roughly around this time that the program review process was slated for revision. According to Dr. Linda Shaw, who is currently serving as the Chair of the Program Assessment Committee (PAC), a review of the process 3-4 years ago uncovered a cumbersome and arduous series of steps, reflective questions, and models for data collection that made up some 100+ pages of program review documents. Many expressed concerns that the activity was often meaningless in that reports received very little feedback and were often shelved without any perceived impact. WASC comments on this matter prompted the PAC to revise the guidelines.
The first draft was rejected by the Faculty Senate over the lack of provisions for faculty compensation. After a series of discussions that recognized the significant addition assessment posed to faculty work load, a new policy was drafted and the Provost embedded funding in each of the colleges to cover 1 course release for the individual in the program who is identified as the lead for the review in the year it is written. The new draft also includes greater mandates for feedback, a consistent policy of 3-5-7 year timetables (depending upon the needs of programs), and provides a framework for both external and internal analysis and input on the part of the PAC Chair, the Department Chair, the faculty member of the program charged with writing the program review, the Dean of the College, and the Provost. It is hoped that the bringing together of these constituents will result in a much more meaningful discussion of resources and an MOU.

While it has not been formally adopted by the Faculty Senate, the new policy will be test-piloted by Biology, Computer Science, Liberal Studies and History, which are slated for review this year; it should be noted that these departments voluntarily and unanimously opted for the new standards.

To aid programs and to encourage regular assessment activities that are required for program review, CSUSM initiated in AY 2006-06 a requirement of yearly program assessment involving gathering data around 1 or more program student learning outcomes (SLOs). However, while the faculty PAC oversees program review, annual program assessment is facilitated by the Office of the Provost, primarily under the management of the newly created Vice President for Planning and Accreditation, who is assisted by two faculty members—the Learning Outcomes Assessment Fellow (LOAF) and the Faculty Fellow for Planning and Accreditation. (It should be noted that these functions were once lodged with the Associate Vice President for Academic Programs, but were relegated to a new administrative arm due to the requirements of reporting mandated by WASC; these changes helped to ease the work load for the Assistant Vice President for Academic Programs).

The current LOAF is Dr. Marie Thomas, who cites a culture where service is highly valued and the faculty are highly service-oriented due to the institution’s commitment to good citizenship. Her role is to work with faculty who need assistance writing learning outcomes, mapping them to assignments, and formulating assessment proposals/plans. Programs are encouraged to submit proposals for up to $750 in funding, to be spent per the discretion of the faculty (i.e. stipends, surveys, student assistants, retreats, extra release time, etc.). Therefore, depending upon how many programs are found within a single department, the money may increase. And while programs are not mandated to work with her, many do take up her offer of assistance.

Dr. Thomas notes that the success of Program Review resides in the continual striving for what is “beneficial” as opposed to what is “ideal.” In other words, the Alverno model that is often touted in assessment literature is not necessarily one that can be readily adopted by institutions like CSUSM given the different make-up of faculty and students, funding sources, and missions/capabilities. Together with Associate Vice President for Planning and Accreditation, Jennifer Jeffries, Dr. Thomas regularly helps programs adopt assessment as a process that is useful to them by generating information and working through ways of solving problems based on that information. In fact, one of her most useful questions is, “What really annoys you (in the classroom) and what can you do about it?” Her advice for colleges like ours is to keep in mind that faculty don’t need theory, they need easy-to-follow and practical techniques that can be matched with what is already being taught in the classrooms. Her role as a union leader on campus also encourages many to place their trust in her.
According to Jennifer Jeffries, the Associate Vice President for Planning and Accreditation, the total annual budget involving just single semester course releases for assessment/program review coordinators and annual assessment projects runs over $40,000. This does not reflect monies spent on training sessions or other larger retreats that are part of CSUSM’s good track record of providing professional support for faculty (including attendance at various WASC venues, such as the yearly Academic Resource Conference). VP Jeffries notes the importance of providing monetary incentives to faculty and cites California State University San Francisco’s successful summer campaign of writing SLOs at a retreat which paid each participating faculty member $1500.


**General Education**

At the present time, CSUSM is undergoing a reform of its General Education program, which has not undergone revision since 1994.

In 2008, the Chancellor of the California State University System released Executive Order 1033, which states that “Each CSU campus shall define its GE student learning outcomes, [sic] to fit within the framework of the four ‘Essential Learning Outcomes’ drawn from the Liberal Education and American [America’s] Promise (LEAP) campaign, an initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities” (Revision of the General Education Program, para. 3). The General Education Committee is now undertaking a reexamination of the GE Philosophy Statement and Policy, which “needs to rest upon the University’s current Mission Statement as well as the new executive order” (Revision of the General Education Program, para. 4). The Committee is currently undertaking a series of campus discussions to help articulate the GE learning outcomes already devised (GELOs) and the LEAP initiative.

GE Assessment is currently centered on Student Writing (thesis construction, organization, and mechanics) and Information Literacy (ability to find appropriate information for an assignment and proficiency in using the information). It should be noted that CSUSM requires that all courses, even ones not certified for GE inclusion, to embed a 2500 word writing assignment into the curriculum. This allows for GELO assessment to be undertaken in departments for Program Review; this enables departments to compare their majors with other non-majors in terms of universal skills.

The same practical mindset utilized by Dr. Thomas is employed by Dr. Sharon Hamill, the General Education Assessment Coordinator. In fact, Dr. Hamill argues one should forget inter-rater reliability and first work on developing trust and a habit of engaging in assessment; one of her first messages when facilitating faculty discussions of assessment is “What is the minimally acceptable level of student work in your course?” Dr. Hamill argues that this the most important aspect in developing faculty ease with assessment—that faculty should look for the least common denominator because assessment is about generating a shared, across-the-board understanding of minimum competencies, not demonstrating the importance or caliber of any one teacher. After all, this is the basic premise for learning-centered outcome assessment.

Dr. Hamill relates that to begin developing a culture of assessment on campus, she began approaching individual faculty members to ask them to personally rate their students per the GE rubrics and report the data to her. Sets of data were then anonymized and collected into a larger report that was then handed over for accreditation purposes. This approach allowed Dr. Hamill to collect over 3,000 student artifacts.
When asked what she thought about arguments over the validity of the actual instructor ranking his/her own students, Dr. Hamill responded by saying that if teachers can be trusted to grade their students, then they should be trusted to assess their students’ work. Furthermore, she argues that assessment should be meaningful to teachers as they are the ones who know about what works for them. Dr. Hamill further stated that if assessment is about comparing or shaming teachers, then the exercise will largely fail because such an approach will not encourage anyone to improve. She makes clear that “My job is not to tell another professor in another discipline how to teach critical thinking or what it looks like in his/her discipline.” Additionally, Dr. Hamill concedes to forgoing details such as inter-rater reliability in favor of building a “grass-roots’ culture” of assessment—she adds that without this as a backdrop, all efforts will be fruitless.

Interestingly, both Dr. Thomas and Dr. Hamill are researchers in psychology and are both experts in psychometrics; both share the same consternation regarding certain institutions’ almost unethical use of standardized tests as a measure of student “learning.” Both cautioned that unless teachers themselves take such tests, they won’t necessarily know how it can (if at all) be mapped to any particular assignment. They also note that the CLA in particular does not generate any information on what can be improved in the curriculum; it is simply a generic measure of cognitive skills.

The rejection of standardized measures of assessment indicates that CSUSM is highly committed to an assessment program that is grounded in improving learning as opposed to simply generating data for accountability. This is a mandate that has been made easy to institutionalize given the CSU system’s commitment to AACU principle of learning as embedded within LEAP as well as the personal pledges of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs—Academic Programs and the Associate Vice President for Planning and Accreditation.

For more information, please see: http://www.csusm.edu/ge/.

**Closing the Loop**

Although Dr. Hamill expressed personal concerns over the need to start using assessment data to implement meaningful change in GE, the reporter found evidence of “closing the loop” in CSUSM’s first-year retention program and faculty development.

David Barsky, the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs—Academic Programs, manages many programs targeting student success. One of his most successful was a 5-year “bridge” program involving $300,000, which paid for faculty (buyouts) in English and Math to work with 4-5 public high schools and stipends for high school teachers to work one-on-one with the students exhibiting the poorest skills. Activities ranged from faculty workshops to curriculum alignment meetings.

Nevertheless, basic mathematics skills among freshmen remain problematic. VP Barksy notes that remediation is thus built into the core freshman experience. He explained their Entry Level Mathematics Exam (ELME), which is scaled from 0-80, with 50 representing a passing score. Students ranking at 40-48 receive 1 semester of remediation, whereas students at 30-38 are slated for 2 semesters of remediation. Students with scores of less than 30 are scheduled for 3 semesters of remediation beginning with Algebra 1 & 2 review. VP Barksy notes that these courses are considered Community College level but they are taught on the CSUSM campus to ensure a coherent university experience for all freshmen, regardless of their placement.
In the past, these courses were taught by Community College faculty; the Community Colleges received no tuition but they did not pay for use of the campus/classrooms/resources. Because this generally entailed a $30,000 loss of revenue, the standing agreement has been amended so that CSUSM teachers (primarily Graduate Teaching Assistants) will staff these courses.

Because the institutional goal is to ensure freshman success, there are substantial resources set aside for this purpose. According to VP Barsky, the Provost has made it clear that this is a mandate for the campus.

Due to their efforts, freshman retention climbed from 70% in 2007-2008 to now roughly 78% as of this past academic year. Programs, such as the summer Mathematics Acceleration Program, are also cited as demonstrating a 12 point gain on the ELME.

More importantly, VP Barsky emphasized the importance of providing adequate training for the teachers of these “remedial” courses. He referred to the Executive Summary on Foundations of Excellence, which cites: “Lecturers and teaching associates, who offer most of the instruction to first year students, do not receive or take advantage of training and support available to tenure-line faculty” (p. 2). As this was noted as one of several structural weaknesses working against retention, faculty retreats (primarily for those staffing lower division courses) were developed as a very successful method for “closing the loop.”

VP Barsky's premise is that regardless of the employment status of the teacher (whether s/he is a graduate teaching fellow, an instructor, or tenure-track faculty), the main objective for hosting inclusive faculty forums and retreats is to encourage consensus over what is “best teaching practices,” knowledge of GE and Program-level learning objectives, and awareness of the most up-to-date technologies and textbooks.

With the assistance of Dr. Joanne Pederse, VP Barsky developed an all-day summer retreat for lecturers and other teachers of mainly freshman or lower division courses that was primarily underwritten by major publishing companies. Book vendors and other education-affiliated companies contributed the food, while in return they were allowed to set up display kiosks for their materials. Some were even invited to present their products. However, the majority of the time was spent with faculty sharing syllabi, learning how to write learning objectives, and hearing from other faculty on challenges and successes in the classroom. Dr. Pedersen notes that many faculty expressed high satisfaction with such activities as they often provide the face-to-face interaction that leads to interdisciplinary partnerships and the sharing of ideas. More importantly, lecturers and instructors are thus able to think of themselves as part of the university, thereby promoting a shared understanding of the freshman body. Such activities also serve as the only venues for professional development for such individuals.

For more information, please see http://www.csusm.edu/fycouncil/foe/index.html and http://www.csusm.edu/fycouncil/files/FoE_ExecSummaryV2.pdf

As a side note, writing on the CSUSM campus apparently does not receive the same remediation approach as mathematics. According to Dr. Catherine Cucinella, the Interim Director of the General Education Writing (GEW) Program, all students entering into CSUSM are placed into GEW 101, which is managed by the Literature and Writing Program.

GEW courses are capped at 20 and may include students who have not passed the English Placement Exam. At one time, GEW required all students to seek assistance at the Writing Center at
least 12 times during the semester; however, given recent furloughs and budget cuts, the Writing Center has indicated it cannot accommodate more than 2 per student per term. When asked if overall student skills were affected by this change, Dr. Cucinella stated that because CSUSM also witnessed a rise in the overall numbers applying for entry, the university could be more selective on the kinds of students it admitted—this may have mitigated any possible adverse consequences to the drop in tutoring.

Dr. Cucinella also cites that GEW is realistically seen as simply an “introduction” to academic writing; it remains the responsibility of the rest of the campus to further enable student progress. She cites a 2500 word minimum requirement for all courses on campus regardless of discipline or acceptance in the GE program. For this reason, specialized second year writing courses are irrelevant and therefore not offered. Dr. Cucinella finally noted that GEW 050 may be taken by students who in good faith are unable to pass the 101 course. This acts as a form of “remediation,” but only after sustained effort in the regular curriculum. All others may repeat GEW 101.

Accreditation and Planning

According to the newly appointed Associate Vice President for Planning and Accreditation, every faculty committee was consulted if not directly involved in the process of both planning and accreditation. CSUSM’s 2009 EER cites over 100 individuals from a variety of sectors: the Academic Senate Budget and Long Range Planning Committee, Academic Senate Program Assessment Committee, Academic Senate University Curriculum Committee, Institutional Planning and Analysis, and the Foundations of Excellence Task Force (which was subdivided into Student Government, Diversity, Faculty, Learning, Organization, Roles and Purposes, Steering (also Philosophy and Improvement) Student Focus Groups, and Transitions (2009 EER, pp. iii-v). The three essays that constitute a major part of the EER were also the result of 3 different sets of individuals (with some overlap)—the Academic Master Planning Essay Writing Team, Strengthening Academic Programs Through Assessment of Student Learning Essay Writing Team, and the Improving Retention of First Year Students Essay Writing Team (2009 EER, p. iii). When asked about the need for such widespread input, VP Jeffries and Faculty Fellow for Planning and Accreditation, Gabriela Sonntag, noted that such efforts lead to a wider buy-in by faculty than if the efforts had been solely concentrated in the hands of a very small group of individuals. In any event, both emphatically stated that the curriculum is the direct responsibility of the faculty; therefore, theirs is the most important voice in the planning and accreditation process, especially with regard to the assessment of student learning in their classes.

Such sentiments were also expressed by VP Barsky, who noted that $35,000 was targeted for hiring consultants from the John Gardner Institute in developing their Foundations of Excellence strategic planning for first-year programs. In an effort to cultivate widespread buy-in, over a 100 faculty and staff were again asked to participate in the planning process.