THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
REGENTS COMMUNICATION

ITEM FOR INFORMATION

Subject: Faculty Governance Update: Response to the Spellings Report

SACUA has received reports on a wide range of issues from the Academic Affairs Advisory Committee (AAAC), which is advisory to Provost Sullivan. The issues dealt with this past year included undergraduate registration, changes in methods for teaching evaluations, the administration of examinations, tenure policies, and the Department of Education's report, ***A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of Higher Education***. The AAAC response to ***A Test of Leadership*** raises some significant issues about the direction of undergraduate education at the University, and should become part of a campus-wide dialogue on the University's educational mission.

A Test of Leadership raises four questions about the state of higher education in the United States:

1. Accessibility: how accessible is higher education, and who will be the college student of tomorrow?
2. Affordability: why is the cost of higher education rising so rapidly and how can college be made more affordable?
3. Accountability: how well are institutions of higher education preparing students to take their places in the workforce of the 21st century; will students have the skills that will enable them to be leaders in the public and private sectors; and how can students know what they are getting for their investment in higher education?
4. Quality: how can we ensure that the United States remains the world leader in innovation and research?

While issues of accountability and affordability have an impact on faculty since they are connected with the population of their classrooms, control of these issues is properly vested with the administration; questions concerning the quality of research and accountability are areas where the faculty must take much responsibility. At the present time, the faculty is concerned with the ways in which the University's research mission can be connected with its role in undergraduate education. The charge to the AAAC committee that responded to ***A Test of Leadership*** was precisely "how to assess the 'value-added' learning achieved by U-M students during their undergraduate experience." In assessing the issue of the "value-added" by a Michigan education, the committee looked the difficulty of quantifying success, and a series of "best practices" for departmental design of undergraduate curricula.

Assessment

In the view of the subcommittee:

The development of any new learning assessment tools should serve two purposes: first, they should allow faculty to evaluate the programs that they offer in the broad context of post-high school education, and, second, they should allow the university to define the terms of the debate about the "value added" by undergraduate education, rather than leaving this definition to others.

Regents' Bylaw 4.04. The Senate Assembly shall serve as the legislative arm of the senate…The assembly shall have power to consider and advise regarding all matters within the jurisdiction of the University Senate which affect the functioning of the University as an institution of higher learning, which concern its obligations to the state and to the community at large, and which relate to its internal organization insofar as such matters of internal organization involve general questions of educational policy.

In examining possible methods of assessment, the committee felt that testing our students through a national testing vehicle such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (http://www.cae.org/content/pro_collegiate.htm), which examines basic skills that students must already have mastered to earn admission to the University, would be redundant. Rather, more reasonable measures that are already used—graduation rates, GPAs, and times to degree broken down by demographic sub-groups—might be supplemented with data on post-graduation choices, including employment, further graduate training, and service, which should be systematically collected. In addition to post-graduation data, the committee recommends the use of more mid-stream surveys of student progress to capture how their experience at the University is helping them learn; senior surveys to assess the skills and abilities that students have gained toward the end of their degree program; alumni surveys and employer interviews. The purpose of these surveys will be to enable us to know whether the undergraduate experience at Michigan is valuable for attaining jobs thereafter, to assess the particular skills it fosters, and whether their time at Michigan inspires students to continue learning throughout their lives. The committee recommends that this material be readily available to the University community to help with curricular planning.

Best Practices

The committee recommends that faculty in degree-granting programs be asked to identify the goals of their program and to demonstrate how their curriculum contributes toward these goals. Stated goals should be sufficiently specific so that the component contributions of individual courses can be recognized. The description of program goals, therefore, should go beyond generalizations about student intellectual growth and increased societal awareness to offer concrete targets and expectations. The two practices that the committee recommends for all programs is that graduating seniors be asked to assemble a "senior portfolio" showing a student's activities in his/her senior year, including courses taken, documentation on UROP and other long-term undergraduate experiences, senior honors theses and work for campus organizations. The committee also recommends that all programs include a senior capstone experience to explore connections among the various components of a program and examine the match between a program's stated goals and student learning. The capstone experience could focus on critical thinking capabilities and the integrative abilities of our students, building on prior course material. This capstone experience could include a student group project, or be a seminar style class, and even a hands-on large-class experience, depending on each program's character.

Conclusions

The committee is not worried about the quality of the education currently offered at Michigan, but it does believe that insufficient time is dedicated to developing higher thinking and critical analysis. The Committee also believes that the university needs to better emphasize all that distinguishes a liberal arts education in the context of a great research university from that offered by four-year colleges and non-R1 institutions.

Rather than ignoring the societal suspicion of higher education that partially motivated "A Test of Leadership," the proposals for assessing student learning create an opportunity to continue and to readjust ongoing efforts to redefine the goals of higher education in a global context.

(Submitted, April, 2007)