December 4, 2013

TO: CAS Department and Program Heads
FROM: Ian F. McNeely, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education
RE: Learning Outcomes

To maintain our accreditation, UO must identify “learning outcomes” expected in our courses, degree programs, and General Education curriculum. This effort, part of a broader “assessment” mandate, is being led centrally by Associate Vice Provost Ken Doxsee in Academic Affairs. The purpose of this memo is to explain what is happening and why. Please share it with your faculty.

1. Necessary tasks for this year and beyond

During the rest of 2013-14, each CAS department/program will be asked to:

(a) review its 2009 assessment plan on file (if one exists) and identify any areas needing revision – by Jan. 22
(b) identify 3-7 learning outcomes for its undergraduate major or majors (and if possible, its undergraduate minor and graduate degree programs) – by Mar. 1
(c) relay and reinforce instructions from CAS on how faculty can include course-level learning outcomes in syllabi starting in spring 2014 – by Mar. 15

Mindful of the huge workload required for compliance with the collective bargaining agreement, my office will provide guidance on how to make each of these tasks manageable yet meaningful. In many departments, the faculty curriculum coordinator is the logical person to take on this responsibility.

In future years, having identified learning outcomes, we will need to make sure we actually assess them. CAS encourages departments that have already begun this process to continue moving forward on a faster schedule in consultation with Ken Doxsee. We hope to use the experiences of these departments to guide others.

Assessing our General Education curriculum is a separate process. CAS is already working on this with the Undergraduate Council, Undergraduate Studies, Academic Affairs, faculty interested in the CAS General Education Renaissance, and others.

2. Learning outcomes: what and why

Learning outcomes simply enumerate what we expect students to learn from our courses and degree programs. The best students can often infer expected learning outcomes from reading a syllabus or a checklist of degree or major requirements. Other students need to have these pointed out explicitly – typically on the syllabus, in a few well-formulated bullet points.
Learning outcomes at the course level are a way of letting the cat out of the bag about course expectations. When well-matched to course assignments and grading standards, they help head off questions like “will this be on the test?” and “why did I get a B on my paper?” When well-matched to broader program- and degree-level learning outcomes, they make it possible for the institution to study how effectively a series of courses leads to a meaningful degree for a given set of students.

Learning outcomes should be assessable, not just aspirational. Not merely expressions of academic ideals, they identify specific knowledge and abilities that instructors and academic programs can responsibly evaluate – always in keeping with each discipline’s own standards of achievement.

3. The accreditors’ mandate

In order for our students to remain eligible for federal financial aid, UO must maintain its accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). For several years, and in response to a nationwide trend, the NWCCU has been pressing UO to develop a more systematic assessment strategy. In its most recent evaluation in 2013, the NWCCU reasserted our need to “identify and publish expected course, general education, program, and degree learning outcomes.” We must also ensure that “faculty with teaching responsibilities be integrally involved at every stage” in assessment. UO must make substantial progress on this mandate before our next comprehensive review in 2016-17.

4. The bigger picture

The point of assessment is to make statements about student learning that approach standards of inquiry worthy of a university. Being explicit about what we expect students to learn is a first step and necessary precondition for that effort. The end goal is to use self-study to improve our educational mission.

Especially in the arts and sciences, enumerating and assessing learning outcomes may seem at odds with the exploratory, open-ended spirit of a liberal education. We tend to approach education holistically, as preparation for a lifetime, and not as a set of discrete components evaluated over just a few years in college. We trust our faculty to teach well and expect our students to take responsibility for learning.

But we live in a time when the value of an arts and sciences education is being severely questioned, even as its cost inexorably rises. Assessment, if done thoughtfully, is one tool – among many – that can help the institution demonstrate the value of such an education to an increasingly skeptical public. How we do this is up to us, collectively. We must use scarce resources wisely, respect faculty time and expertise, and only measure that which can usefully and appropriately be measured. I welcome any and all feedback at adue@uoregon.edu.