

Improvement Dimension Report

University of Northern Iowa

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Committee Members:

Gretta Berghammer, Professor, Theatre

Seth Brown, Assoc Professor, Psychology

Karen Cunningham, Program Coordinator, Individual Studies

Shirley Davis, Student

Marilyn Drury, Director, ITS-Educational Technology

Bob Frederick, Director, Career Services

David Marchesani, Academic Advisor & Career Dev Coord, Academic Advising

Kristin Moser, Senior Research Analyst, Institutional Research

James Robinson, Assoc Professor, Philosophy & World Religions

Todd Thomas, Residential Network Specialist, Residence Administration

Jeffrey Wachter, Student

Spencer Walrath, Student

Dimension Objective:

Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement. This

assessment is specific to the first year as a unit of analysis—a distinct time period and set of experiences, academic and otherwise, in the lives of students. It is also linked systemically to the institution's overall assessment. Assessment results are an integral part of institutional planning, resource allocation, decision-making, and ongoing improvement of programs and policies as they affect first-year students. As part of the enhancement process and as a way to achieve ongoing improvement, institutions are familiar with current practices at other institutions as well as with research and scholarship on the first college year.

Therefore, the primary focus for the Improvement Dimension was to closely examine **five specific initiatives** (see below) identified by the UNI FOE Steering Committee, in order to determine if assessments were being conducted for each, and the results interpreted and utilized to improve upon existing practices. Additionally, we were asked to determine to what degree recent assessment activities improved understanding of select student elements and to determine to what degree select campus strategies were being used to improve the first year. Finally, the Dimension Committee offers recommendations for improving ways in which assessments are assessed in relation to each of the five initiatives.

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Five Initiatives:

PI 9.1 and PI 9.2 relate to the assessment of five (5) first year initiatives identified by the UNI FoE Steering Committee:

1. Orientation/Registration Programs
2. Residence Life Programming
3. Liberal Arts Core/Category I
4. First Year Advising
5. Institution’s Vision and Mission statement regarding: Personalized and engaging learning opportunities for all students

PI 9.1 Assessment

To what degree does each initiative include assessments that are appropriately timed, focused and based on data collection and analysis methods that provide high quality information for decision making?

INITIATIVES	Very Low/None (1)	Low (2)	Medium (3)	High (4)	Very High (5)	N/A
Orientation/registration programs		x				
Residence life programming			x			
Liberal Arts Core/Category I	x					
First Year Academic Advising			x			
Program/mission statement: "personalized and engaged learning opportunities"	x					

A summary breakdown describing the Current Situation and Recommendations for each initiative continue below. Full sub-committee reports for each of the five initiatives are provided in Appendixes A-E.

Current Situation Narrative of PI 9.1:

Initiative One – Orientation: Currently, orientation programs for first-year students are separately administered and assessed by the administrators and staff of those programs. Consequently, there is no unified model for how to manage and evaluate first-year student orientation, making it difficult to compare or combine results.

At present, assessments are being conducted by the International Services Office, Department of New Student Programs and Jump Start Program in an effort to better understand the needs and expectations of first-year students participating in the orientation process. The use of a satisfaction survey is among the most common method employed by these programs to obtain information (see Appendix A for a complete listing and description of Types of Assessment).

The 2008-2010 University Catalog (p.37) identifies a “freshman” as any student who has earned less than 30 credit hours. However, the questions utilized to determine a “First-Year Student” varies among individual undergraduate academic units and, as a result, may create discrepancies during the assessment process and consistency of use of the results.

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Types of Assessment:

- New Student Programs – **Evidence: New Student Survey.**
- **Summer Orientation Evaluations**
- International Services Office – **Evidence: International Student Orientation Evaluation Form.**
- Academic Learning Center (Jumpstart) – **Evidence: Jump Start 2008 Program Evaluation.** . In addition to the program evaluation, the Jump Start program administers three main personality and placement instruments: 1) **COMPASS**, 2) **College Student Inventory (CSI)**, 3) **StrengthsQuest®**

Initiative Two – Residence Life Programming: Residence Life currently utilizes a variety of methods (see Appendix B) for assessing first year students at UNI, both within the Department of Residence (internally) and through other University departments (externally). Surveys, such as the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I)/Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) Resident Assessment, cover many topics pertinent to Residence Life programming, but focus on satisfaction rather than actual behavior improvements. Asking students if their behavior has changed as a result of programming is the current method used for determining programming effectiveness and is addressed in several different surveys i.e. the House survey and Immersion Project survey. These surveys evaluate perceived changes rather than actual outcomes. The biggest challenge facing Residence Life is to not only use existing assessments but both to utilize that information in an applicable fashion and to create assessments that measure residents’ actual change in behavior.

Assessing the success of Residence Life programming efforts through surveys is difficult. Many informal assessments are done through RAs, students, and the expertise and experience of Residence Life Coordinators (RLC) , which then should provide feedback to Residence Life staff regarding their programming effectiveness.

Many surveys utilized by Residence Life have a small sub-set of application for programming efforts. While some surveys are highly systematic, they are not necessarily systematically assessing the information useful to Residence Life. Residence Life programming would like to assess whether behavior changed as a result of programming efforts, whereas several surveys ask whether a student is satisfied with how they received programming, which are two different types of assessment. A student may not be satisfied with programming but still change their behavior as a result of it, or vice-versa.

Participation rates for some surveys (House survey and Dive-In Days) had poor and/or varied participation. This input makes utilizing these assessments difficult since the data collection may be skewed or an inaccurate representation of students.

Initiative Three – Liberal Arts Core/Category I: UNI’s Liberal Arts Core Category I includes the following courses, one or more of which is taken by students during their first year of study OR is completed in advance of admission to UNI:

- College Writing and Research – 3 hrs. **OR**

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- Craft of Academic Writing – 3 hrs. **OR**
- Critical Writing About Literature – 3 hrs.

- Oral Communication – 3 hrs.

- Mathematics in Decision Making **OR**
- Calculus **OR**
- Introductory Statistics for Life Sciences – 3 hrs **OR**
- Introduction to Statistical Methods – 3 hrs. **OR**
- Introduction to Mathematical Modeling – 3 hrs. **OR**
- Computational Modeling and Simulation

- Personal Wellness

The purposes and outcomes for Category I courses are to develop two significant areas of communication: 1) written and oral communication and 2) quantitative communication which include probability and statistics; in addition students should develop an understanding and appreciation of personal wellness as a lifestyle, consciously chosen, in which one takes advantage of the opportunities to maximize holistic health.

The University has used MAPP (Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress) since 2006 for assessment of Category I skills (see Appendix C1 for additional details).

Category I courses are reviewed by the LAC Committee in conjunction with a faculty committee organized for that specific purpose **once every six years**. Those purposes are outlined in Appendix C of this report. The LAC Committee uses the results of this assessment process to make recommendations to the University Faculty Senate and appropriate University administrators. Such recommendations are made in consultation with interested persons. The Committee provides the Senate with a copy of the final review along with the LAC Committee Review Summary. We **did not find evidence** that assessment results were shared directly with faculty responsible for delivering these courses, or that recommendations were made in direct consultation with this group of faculty.

Some departments with a strong investment in LAC Category I courses have begun to conduct more frequent assessments of the Category I courses they deliver as part of departmental student outcomes assessment, but there is confusion across campus as to who should be designing and implementing this assessment process - the departments in which the course is housed OR the LAC committee. As a result, there is no consistent, established, SOA based assessment of Category I courses across campus. The ongoing “draft status” of Category I outcomes make pursuing systematic assessment problematic for either group. Systematic assessment practices for all Category I courses are summarized below

Oral Communication: There has been no systematic assessment of the Oral Communication course besides that which is required as a part of the LAC category review process. The Department of Communication Studies is willing to use the already electronically collected speech and test scores, if so desired, for such an assessment in the future. Approximately 90% of the sections taught share a common textbook, assignments, and assignment rubrics for assignment evaluation. The department

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has identified the need for a regular meeting of representatives from the Category I courses to discuss assessment.

Reading and Writing: There is no defined outcome procedure for this category, and no ongoing, systematic assessment beyond what is required of the LAC category review process. The Department of English Writing Committee has discussed this issue, and has attempted to create some procedure, but as of this date nothing has been put into practice.

Quantitative Analysis and Communication: There are no systematic assessments beyond exams, etc. written in alignment with specific course offerings, being conducted at this time.

Wellness: Wellness has been conducting a pre and post test within the aerobic lab component (which is being dropped as of Fall 2009) and in order to evaluate if there is improvement in 5 fitness assessment categories. Wellness has periodically surveyed students on different topics in order to determine the relevance, importance and interest in each, and has used those survey results to consider and/or implement course content adjustments.

Initiative Four – First Year Academic Advising: Assessment of first-year academic advising is being conducted throughout campus; however, departments and programs providing first-year advising and programming are conducting assessment independently and without the ability to compare or combine results. Approximately 66% of first year students are in programs (through the College of Business and the Office of Academic Advising) that have developed and conduct systematic assessment. These assessments, as well as many of the assessments evaluated for this Dimension report, focus on the specific topics and goals that are deemed important to the individual advising center or program.

The **Advising Mission and Vision Task Force** noted in their report that *"there is a considerable amount of work to be done to create clear communication channels and consistent practices for assessing advising."* Assessment tools (for a complete description see Appendix D) currently being conducted on an annual basis containing questions related to first-year academic advising include:

- **100:059 First year Seminar for Business Majors Course Assessment – Pre and Post Assessment**
- **Office of Academic Advising Pre and Post Outcome Survey**
- **New Student Survey, Fall 2007**
- **Student Evaluations for Freshman Orientation** (Section III. Academic Advising and Registration at Orientation)
- **Jump Start 2008 Program Evaluation** (Question: Meet my Advisor)
- **NSSE Data 2007** (Questions: 10. Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor and 12. Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic advising you have received at your institution?)

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- **Student Satisfaction Survey 2003 - 2008** (Question: 1.2. I have received high quality advising at UNI.)

- **Peer Academic Advisor in Residence Survey**

Other assessment tools conducted on campus include questions related to academic advising, however, there is not a specific question or methods to identify responses from first year students only (A complete discussion of concerns related to PI 1 can be found in Appendix D).

Initiative Five - Program/Mission Statement: “personalized and engaged learning opportunities:

Overall, there is **little visible evidence** to document how efforts to engage first year students are being assessed. A NACADA document states that a systematic campus-wide advising evaluation program based on student outcomes assessment is needed. The Office of Academic Advising and the College of Business advising center have recently developed and implemented pre- and post-tests to track advisee progress and student outcomes over time, and these tests, which reach two-thirds of the freshmen student body at UNI, which **could be linked** to student engagement, but without an institutional definition or vision of what is meant by engaged learning, it is difficult to determine if the current pre- and post tests being used by both of these centers truly examine the issue of engaged learning. Because this assessment initiative is new, no longitudinal data exists to determine progress, and improvement over time. All Academic programs and courses are also assessed systematically across campus, varying from once every 6 or 7 years to every semester. However, no evidence exists to suggest that these assessment efforts are linked in such a way as to provide specific information for either personalized or engaged learning.

Institutionally, the most thorough assessment of engagement on campus is participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). 2008 NSSE Benchmark Assessment data indicated that **less than 50% of first year students** (40.9%) felt they were engaged in their learning, when engagement is defined as follows:

- asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions
- made a class presentation
- worked with other students on projects during class
- worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments
- tutored or taught other students
- participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course
- discussed ideas from your readings or classes with other students outside of class
- asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions

Many activities and services at UNI lead to personalization of services related to learning, including the Academic Learning Center, CHAMPS Life Skill course, and the use of e-portfolios in some first year courses, but evidence that these programs and activities are assessed in order to determine the degree to which UNI provides a personalized learning experience to first year students does not exist.

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PI 9.2 Use of Assessment

To what degree have assessment results been used to improve existing practices across the following initiatives?

INITIATIVES	Very Low/None (1)	Low (2)	Medium (3)	High (4)	Very High (5)	N/A
Orientation/registration programs		x				
Residence life programming				x		
Liberal Arts Core/Category I	x					
First Year Academic Advising		x				
Program/mission statement: "personalized learning opportunities"	x					

Current Situation Narrative of PI 9.2:

Initiative One – Orientation/Registration Programs: Although limited in scope, assessment results are being used informally by the Office of Vice President of Student Affairs / Coordinator of New Student Programs, International Services and Jump Start to critique and improve programs. These results are typically used internally (within the department or college) and are not distributed or shared, for the purpose of collaboration, to the university-wide community.

The Coordinator of New Student Programs uses the results gathered from the **Summer Orientation Evaluation** and **New Student Survey** to change and implement new programming as well as improve program sessions for first-year students and their parents (e.g., a resource page for parents was developed as a result of this assessment). The International Services Office uses the results of their **International Student Orientation Evaluation Form** to change and improve programming for international students. Jump Start utilizes the results of the **COMPASS** to evaluate academic preparedness in order to register students in appropriate courses. For the **CSI**, the results of this assessment are used for advising and class purposes and for referrals to other academic departments.

Initiative Two – Residence Life Programming: With a few exceptions, the assessments discussed earlier and referenced in Appendix C are utilized regularly by Residence Life staff as a decision-making tool for improving programming. Some examples of findings made after reviewing current assessments include:

ACHA-NCHA confirmed the continued need for alcohol education.

House surveys identified that career-related issues could be improved and revisions will be made to improve passing along this information to students.

The ACUHO-I/EBI survey identified improving the areas of managing time and related academic excellence. Changes in these areas include Houses recently being identified for positive academic achievement, the PAIR program’s responsibilities were changed, and grade-related bulletin boards were mandated.

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Resident Life Coordinators (RLCs) are given priorities gathered from the previous year's ACUHO-I/EBI results, as well as other related assessment information, such as the House survey results. In addition, RLCs provide feedback they have gathered from RA staff and through their expertise and experiences.

Initiative Three – Liberal Arts Core/Category I: Category 1 related data from MAPP have been gathered into handouts and presented in workshops to faculty and staff during the fall semester of the 2008-2009 school year. The workshops were not well attended. The information is posted on the UNI website. There is no evidence to support that this information is being used in any organized, systemic way, to make changes in courses or curricula.

(see <http://www.uni.edu/assessment/data/documents/lacworkshopcommunicationf08.pdf> and Quantitative at <http://www.uni.edu/assessment/data/documents/lacquantitativeskills2007-8data.pdf>).

As noted earlier, no systematic assessments are being conducted in the areas of Oral Communication, Writing and Mathematics; results from the LAC generated Category I six year review process are not shared in any systematic way with faculty responsible for teaching these courses; Wellness has used student surveys to assess and make changes to content themes and to evaluate whether fitness outcomes are being achieved in the aerobic labs. As noted earlier, the labs are being suspended as of Fall 2009.

Initiative Four – First Year Academic Advising: There is no formal and/or written plan in place for the analysis and use of academic advising assessment results at the institutional or individual levels. Through anecdotal evidence, it was found that results from assessments are typically used internally (within a department or college) but are not distributed or shared for information and/or collaboration to the university-wide community. Recently, two assessments have been developed and implemented for purposes of advising improvements:

1. The **100:059 First-year Seminar for Business Majors Course Assessment – Pre and Post Assessment** and the **Office of Academic Advising Pre and Post Outcome Survey**, are assessments of new programs. The assessment tools have been established and conducted for the first time in this current academic year (2008-09). Staff from these programs have yet to have the opportunity to review results and improve practices as necessary. Discussions with both the College of Business and the Office of Academic Advising reveal that plans are to collect data on a continual basis, analyze responses, and utilize results to determine improvements and changes to these programs as necessary.
2. The **New Student Survey, Fall 2007** was not conducted in the Fall 2008 due to the assessments administered for the Foundations of Excellence. Although the use of results has been limited and informal, the goal is to collect data to make annual programming changes and determine if desired outcomes are being met.

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Initiative Five - Program/Mission Statement: “personalized and engaged learning opportunities:

While various assessment initiatives related to personalized and engaged learning are ongoing across campus, there is not much evidence, other than anecdotal information, to demonstrate that the results of the assessments are being used for improving the student engagement experience on the UNI campus. The efforts undertaken in academic advising are the most advanced at this point, but not enough longitudinal data exists for that information to be directly used for making improvements with regard to personalized and engaged learning. There is also no indication that the assessment data of academic programs and courses results in critical review and analysis of the program/course eventually leading to modifications or restructuring specifically aligned to personalized and engaged learning. There is no documentation to suggest that the NSSE data is being used to improve engaged learning opportunities of first year students. The results of the faculty and staff portion of the FOE survey that pertain directly to the improvement dimension show that while assessment is being conducted, the results of the assessments are not widely used to shape the first year student experience at UNI. Faculty and staff believe that UNI does a marginal job of assessing what is relevant to first year students (45.2% responded fair). The majority of respondents (74.3%) rate UNI as fair to poor in disseminating assessment results in a timely manner, and 72.8% say that the assessment results are rarely used to make improvements on campus. This feedback is supported by the lack of evidence of assessment related improvements in the FOE evidence library and across campus as a whole.

PI 9.3 Understanding

To what degree have recent assessment activities improved campus understanding of the following elements of student success?

INITIATIVES	V Low/None (1)	Low (2)	Medium (3)	High (4)	V High (5)	N/A
Student allocation of their time		x				
Student/Student connections	X					
Student/faculty connections			x			
Student use of campus services	X					
Student class attendance patterns	X					
Patterns of student involvement	X					

Current Situation Narrative: The Improvement Dimension focused on the fifteen questions from the Faculty/Staff Survey that directly related to the initiatives listed for PI 9.3 and 9.4., employing additional information from the evidence library as appropriate or necessary (e.g. the National Survey of Student Engagement, etc). In our judgment, the results of the Faculty/Staff survey (Appendix F) were quite clear. With respect to the degree that recent assessment activities improved campus understanding of student allocation of time, 73.4% of faculty/staff indicated that it had slight or no influence on their work with first year students. Furthermore, 76.1% of faculty and staff did not use demographic information about students to improve their understanding of first years, and 77.1% did not utilize pre-enrollment academic skills information about students to aid them in assisting and teaching first years. Additionally, when asked about utilizing current practices at other institutions and utilizing professional or published

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research on first year students, respectively, 77.5% and 66.7% were not influenced by either source of information. Outside of isolated pockets of anecdotal evidence, little evidence was found that faculty/staff *systematically* collect or utilize assessment results to improve their understanding of student/student connections or student/faculty connections. Some data does exist in the NSSE but the results are relatively recent, not widely distributed and have not been utilized for process improvement. The data, however, is useful for its institutional benchmarking and as baseline for future assessment. (SEE: UNI NSSE 2007 Benchmarks Appendix G for more information)

In light of the analysis above, it should be noted that four questions in the Faculty/Staff Survey yielded some rather interesting results. When asked to the degree that student evaluations, assessments or feedback directly influence first years at the institutional level, 61.7% indicated this as moderately to very high. Also, 71.5% (moderate to very high) of faculty/staff felt that the institution was assessing what's relevant, 66% (moderate to very high) of faculty/staff felt that the institution was disseminated the results in a timely manner and 66.1% (moderate to very high) of faculty/staff felt that the institution was using the results for improvement.

PI 9.4 Strategies

To what degree have the following strategies been used by your campus to improve the first year?

INITIATIVES	V Low/None (1)	Low (2)	Medium (3)	High (4)	V High (5)	N/A
Attendance at higher education meetings		x				
Participation in multi-campus initiatives focused on the first year		x				
Broad campus exposure to external experts		x				
Broad exposure to campus-based knowledge/expertise about the first year		x				

Current Situation Narrative: As with PI 9.3, the evidence here is clear. It appears that UNI does not utilize the listed strategies to improve the first year. The data (Appendix F) indicates that 67.9% of faculty/staff do not attend conferences or workshops at UNI on the first year student while 72.8% of faculty/staff indicated that they do not attend national/regional conferences or meetings on the first year student. While slightly less than half (46.8%) do indicate that they read professional materials on the first year student, 76.1% do not contribute to publications or present at conferences on first year student issues. Additionally, no direct evidence was analyzed that verified either broad campus exposure to external experts or broad exposure to campus-based knowledge/expertise about the first year. In fact, during multiple conversations with faculty during this process, many expressed surprise at the number of first year activities and programs specific to the first year student, the amount of department level/program level assessment but lack of institutional coordination, and the lack of communication on institutional level data.

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Opportunities and Challenges:

It appears that the greatest opportunity for UNI, as evidenced above, is to align institutional perceptions with individual reality. Utilization of assessments, dissemination of data and educational opportunities for faculty/staff may simply and yet significantly improved campus understanding of the elements of student success. Also, the opportunity exists to develop a core of faculty/staff that have a desire to know more and engage more in the first year experience. The FOE process has generated a broad base of interest from both groups.

Challenges will include focusing on that which is salient and specific to outcomes, developing and maintaining a clear channel of communication across this institution, and nurturing a culture of relevance and value for consistent, ongoing assessment and improvement after the FOE assessment process concludes. Additionally, the challenge will be to support the faculty, staff and administrators who do have an interest in FOE with time and/or resources that will allow them to participate, attend, read and review, assess and make use of assessments, and align curriculum with student outcomes.

As a final note, we would like to list several specific challenges including the fact that 1) not all first-year students are in programs which conduct assessment (approximately 66% of first year students are in programs conducting assessment, 33% of students are in academic programs where assessment may be inconsistent or non-existent), 2) at present there is not a university-wide identification criteria for the first-year student for assessment (the definition of a "first-year" student varies and, not surprisingly, so does the classification questions asked on assessments) and 3) there are no standardized assessment and/or a common set of questions for comparison.
