CHAPTER THIRTEEN: OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

I. Purpose of the chapter:

This chapter presents an inventory of current outcomes assessment procedures at Brooklyn College as conveyed to the Committee on Outcomes Assessment, and it analyzes these procedures. It then presents a plan for systemic outcomes assessment at the college.

II. Inventory and Analysis of Current Outcomes Assessments

A. College-wide

Brooklyn College has at present a number of ways of evaluating its effectiveness in identifying and meeting its goals. Taken together they constitute a de facto assessment plan:

- Five year review of mission and planning
- Annual departmental reports
- Annual CUNY Academic Program Planning reports on academic changes
- Annual Data Book from the Office of Institutional Research
- Cohort and Retention Studies (OIR), 1986, 1992, 1996
- Ten year cycle of external evaluations for departments, including self-study, visit and report by evaluators, and response by department
- Reviews of extra-departmental academic programs by the Faculty Council Committee on Review of Programs, annually with in-depth reviews every seven years
- Review of all new academic programs after three years by the Committee on Review of Programs
- Consultants hired by the administration for specific issues
- Annual faculty evaluation questionnaire completed by all students during classroom time

This plan has worked moderately well to maintain the institution's self-cognizance, but it has been mainly an affair of administrators, including departmental administrators and leaders of Faculty Council committees. There has been little college-wide feedback. The faculty evaluation questionnaire has not been used for statistical analysis except in a rough-and-ready guide produced by students.

B. Departmental

The Outcomes Assessment Committee sent letters requesting information on program goals and methods of assessing effectiveness in meeting those goals to all academic departments and programs, including the Library and Student Affairs and Services, to a variety of centers, and to major administrative offices. A follow-up letter was sent to departments that did not respond to the first letter after two months.
Twenty-one of the thirty-one departments responded, including the Library and the Department of Personal Counseling. The nineteen teaching departments will be considered in this section; the Library and Personal Counseling will be taken up in separate sections.

Sixty-five methods of outcomes assessment were reported by the teaching departments, some overlapping but all conveying distinctive concepts. (See Appendix 3.) Some methods are obviously dictated by the characteristics of a program, such as the need to test performance in Art Studio, Film Production, and Music, or the need to test mastery in one course before allowing students to move on to another course, as in Mathematics and Modern Languages and Literatures. Some methods are those traditionally used in academia — quizzes, examinations, papers — so taken for granted that several departments neglected to mention them in their letters to the committee. That neglect may, however, point to recognition of a very real issue of outcomes assessment: the effort to validate the grade assessment of individual students by individual instructors.

Grades in themselves are simply an inadequate tool of institutional outcomes assessment; or, to put it another way, the individual instructor cannot carry the burden of such assessment. Outcomes assessment has to have an aggregate quality to it if it is to be meaningful to anyone other than a satisfied or dissatisfied instructor or student. The ultimate question of why a student's learning in a course should be of interest to anyone else can be answered in two ways. One is that an institutional assessment is now being required by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The other and more important is that everyone in a college community ought to be interested in knowing how well the college is doing and how it can do better.

Many departments clearly do want to gain a sense of how effectively they are achieving their goals. One thing that is troubling in their responses is that the goals are so often very general, which makes it difficult to know just what effectiveness in meeting them would look like. Only two departments, Speech and Music, have so far undertaken the task of identifying a set of specific goals for each of their courses and then of identifying specific student achievements that would indicate whether those goals had been met. Yet that task is at the heart of outcomes assessment.

Part of the problem has to do with language. The word goal is itself very general, and it might tighten thinking about effectiveness if the question were put in terms of the mastery of skills and techniques on one side and of the learning of content on the other: of what a teacher expects a student to know or be able to do at the end of a semester or of what a program expects a major to know or be able to do at the time of graduation. In the language of outcomes assessment the question is one of expected outcomes. If such expected outcomes can be listed, the ways of determining whether students have met expectations can be worked out more precisely, if not really more easily.

Other modes of precise assessment have been adopted by some departments. As already noted, tests of levels of mastery are necessary in some kinds of majors. Some departments have common tests at various levels, others have common questions embedded in tests for courses with several sections. In some cases there are standardized assessment tests required by CUNY or New York State or professional organizations.
Less precise as an instrument of assessment but perhaps more useful to many departments is the kind of collegial activity displayed by the Film Department. Members of the department meet frequently among themselves both informally and in semi-annual retreats; the faculty has scheduled meetings each semester with majors; there are scheduled reviews of syllabi and teaching approaches; class visits are made by invitation. What is so valuable in these activities is the constant exchange of information — feedback from the experience of teaching and the perception of what students are learning in order to improve both teaching and learning. The improvement of teaching and learning is the expected outcome of outcomes assessment.

A final word about the inventory of academic departments must be said about the ten departments that did not respond. The reason, one may be quite certain, is that people were too busy, already overburdened with bureaucratic requests. But the likelihood is implicit, as well, that statements of goals and modes of assessment were not ready to hand. An outcomes assessment plan will have to specify interesting procedures that will routinely provide usable reports.

C. Extra-departmental programs

Responses from extra-departmental programs came from the BA-MD Program, the Ford Colloquium, the program in Studies of Religion, and the Scholars Program. However, all extra-departmental programs already report annually to the Faculty Council Committee on Review of Programs, listing such information as faculty teaching in the program, number of courses scheduled each semester, and enrollment in courses. The Director of each program is also invited to comment on issues of concern to the program, and many do comment. The Committee issues an annual report to Faculty Council summarizing the state of extra-departmental programs, calling attention to problems, and sometimes suggesting possible solutions. Since these programs run with very small faculties, the kind of close-knit exchange of information about teaching and learning discussed above flourishes in them. Indeed, when they have lacked that kind of interest, they have died.

For the Honors Programs (BA-MD, Ford Colloquium, Scholars Program) there are also benchmark moments of truth, which are, of course, assessment activities: grade point average requirements, participation in seminars, and the completion of research papers. Since the Ford Colloquium also has as a clearly stated expected outcome the admission of graduates to postgraduate schools, a clear measure of effectiveness is ready to hand. The BA-MD program follows its students' success rate at SUNY Health Science Center/Brooklyn.

D. Library

The Library and its affiliate Academic Information Technologies (AIT) are reviewed regularly (with annual reports) by two Faculty Council committees. They also report regularly to departmental representatives. The Library's collection assessment follows guidelines for research libraries. It has a website that invites comments about its effectiveness, and in a more homely fashion maintains suggestion boxes and a response board in the library itself. In its annual report it offers the following kinds of statistics, all pertinent to its assessment of effectiveness:

- Attendance in library use classes
- Catalogued titles (by material type)
- Collection growth (by category of material)
- Database searching (numbers of searches by department and reader status)
Interlending and document supply (as lender and borrower, by category of material and reader status)
- Library hours
- Library instruction (numbers of classes, drop-in sessions, students)
- Spending for collections (by category of material)

The Library also compares itself to other CUNY libraries.

E. Division of Student Life

The Division of Student Life incorporates eight offices with clear objectives, essentially indicated in their titles: Health Clinic; Health Programs; Emergency Medical Squad Office; Recreation, Intramurals, and Athletics; Student Center (SUBO); Student Development; Student Life; Veterans Affairs and Counseling.

Outcomes assessment in these offices is conducted quantitatively by counting the number of activities and the number of students participating in or taking advantage of the activities, but there is also much qualitative assessment, chiefly in the form of frequent meetings of the staff within each office and a seeking of feedback from students. Although there was no question on co-curricular or extra-curricular life at Brooklyn College on the short questionnaire sent by the Outcomes Assessment Committee to recent graduates in January 1998, a number of alumni wrote appreciative comments. This unsought assessment supports the sense of the Division of Student Life that it is doing well and suggests that surveys of students and alumni might be a useful addition to its current procedures for outcomes assessment.

F. Personal Counseling

The Personal Counseling and Career Services Center (including the Department of Personal Counseling), under the supervision of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, provides counseling and referral services for personal development, crisis intervention and acute emotional problems, major selection and career advisement, mid-college career advisement, transition to graduate school and the world of work, students with disabilities, international students, and housing. Various processes contribute to the Center’s assessment of these varied activities: quantitative measures of how many students are seen for different kinds of service, the kinds of problems presented, and so forth, summarized annually; frequent meetings to review sample cases; visits to departments for feedback; client surveys. In the most recent survey, conducted throughout 1995-96, the Center received very favorable evaluations, 99% of the over 200 clients returning surveys rating their overall experience with the service as either excellent (75.5%) or good (23.5%).

III. An Outcomes Assessment Plan

The purpose of the Outcomes Assessment Plan is to identify practices and programs at Brooklyn College that are doing well and those that need improvement, covering administrative operations, student services, teaching and learning. The process of outcomes assessment should engage all members of the college community in a continuing study of goals and effectiveness. The process should be circular or interactive, as the study of goals looks to the study of
effectiveness and the latter looks back. Since the whole process itself is the key feature of the Outcomes Assessment Plan, it should not be thought to come to rest with a meaningless accumulation of more reports; good ideas must invigorate planning, not just within a program but among programs. Successes must feed into teaching throughout the curriculum.

Although the development of an Outcomes Assessment Plan is the result of a requirement for such a plan for reaccreditation by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, it makes sense to recognize the value of outcomes assessment planning for the college. Requirements often do have a heuristic effect. The current plan is presented as something that will be useful and beneficial to the college, and interesting, even stimulating, to everyone. The plan is not presented as a fixed matrix of reports, but as a method for getting people at the college to begin to think more openly about what they are doing. One sign that the plan is working will be that it changes.

A. College-wide

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the college already has elements of an outcomes assessment plan, but it is one driven by administrators, failing to engage a large part of the faculty, with minimal mechanisms for feedback and impact on teaching and learning.

An improved version of the faculty evaluation questionnaire is being devised for use beginning in the Fall of 1998; the student responses to this new questionnaire will be recorded as aggregate data, which will make meaningful comparisons possible. It should be a major outcomes assessment instrument.

In order to make current outcomes assessment instruments more useful to the college community, the administration needs to take certain steps:

1. Make it easy to find assessment information. The annual Data Book is widely distributed, but all other data are held in administrative offices without publicity as to what is available. For example, the committee studying outcomes assessment for this report found out about the retention studies by accident. There should be at least an annual statement of what is available and how to get it. A special office should be established as a clearing house of useful data. The public reports of Faculty Council committees (such as the one on Review of Programs) might also be filed there for ready access. All such reports should be available on the Institutional Research website.

2. Improve the data base and data base functions. The Director of the Office of Institutional Research reports that he has problems gathering data in part because of an imposed reliance on outdated CUNY systems. The college should proceed to establish its own system, one quicker and more flexible than the present system, with clear lines of responsibility about who can provide what information.

3. A better system of seeking assessment information from alumni is needed. Alumni evaluations and achievements are significant indicators of a college's effectiveness. In preparation for this report a short survey was mailed to approximately 7,000 alumni, those who had graduated with a baccalaureate degree over the last five years. A return of 826 was considered useful, if not statistically valid. Below, programs are asked to maintain...
contact with their majors after graduation. The administration must provide leadership and assistance in improving feedback from alumni.

4. The administration must actively follow up the planned department and program reports on outcomes assessment (see below). At present, the administration receives annual reports from departments, including reports on activities responding to external evaluations. In the past few years the Assistant Provost has met with department chairs to review these reports. Now, as departments prepare for outcomes assessment, the administration should seek greater, more pointed interaction: how can we help you do what you want to do? After the outcomes assessment reports are made, the administration should review assessments and their results with the departments. An effort must be made to supplement the one-man Office of Institutional Research with at least one more person, an authority on outcomes assessment who can provide such assistance and feedback.

Evidence of the college's shortcomings in outcomes assessment is, in fact, to be found in the very questionnaire providing guidelines to department chairs in the preparation of their self-study reports to the Provost. The guidelines ask all the right questions, such as:

"How does the department evaluate its success in meeting its goals? Methods of evaluation? Strategies for improvement? What is the extent of faculty involvement in counseling? What can the department say about its purpose, pedagogical objectives, performance and outcomes, student satisfaction, comparison to similar programs elsewhere, preprofessional or career articulation? How does the department determine what changes to make and how does it assess the effects of changes on faculty and students? Does the department attempt systematically to track its graduates? What are the department's needs for statistical and analytical reports that entail the services of the Office of Institutional Research?"

Most departments, however, are not prepared to answer such questions and are not pressed to do so by the administration. Answers would require a systematic assessment plan involving reports from faculty to chairs, with feedback, as well as reports from chairs to administration, with feedback. At present, the administration and the departments are moving to such a plan; an outcomes assessment plan thus meets a felt need.

B. Department Majors

The main goal of the outcomes assessment plan is to have the whole faculty take the lead in considering how effectively teaching and learning are being achieved at Brooklyn College. The idea is to extend the model of an active small department such as Film to larger departments by means of small discussion groups of faculty members teaching a usably narrow subject matter. For example, the relatively few members of the very large English Department who teach American literature would be asked to meet regularly to consider the effectiveness of their program, to compare syllabi, paper topics, and examinations, to work out the expected outcomes of their courses, and to report on means of assessment, student responses, and grade achievements. In fact, the American literature teachers voluntarily did a part of this work about ten years ago when they presented a new American literature curriculum for the department's
The outcomes assessment plan would ask the teachers to meet more regularly and report their findings.

All authorities on outcomes assessment emphasize that the faculty must own the plan, and we believe that the plan described here satisfies that need. We also believe that the very process of having faculty members meet regularly to discuss and describe their interactions with students will be beneficial to faculty, students, and administration — to Brooklyn College.

1. The time needed to develop and implement an outcomes assessment plan must be considered realistically. It will be a gradual process. Small groups of faculty members who have worked on important committee assignments have tended to meet about once a month. It seems likely that there will be times when outcomes assessment groups will meet that often, especially early in the development of the plan, when precise objectives are being developed. There may well be times when there will be little to discuss though ideally the plan counts on the stimulation of faculty interest.

The plan does not require that every committee issue a report every year. In fact, a three year cycle seems called for. First, small groups would meet throughout an academic year, producing a report. The reports of groups within a department would go to a departmental Committee on Outcomes Assessment for study during the next year, leading to a departmental report at the end of the year. Departmental reports, along with reports of extra-departmental programs, would then go to a Faculty Council Committee on Outcomes Assessment for study during the next year, and that committee would report to Council.

In the opening years of the plan's operation, it is presumed that some groups and departments will move faster than others in working out reports. In any event a system of staggered reporting should be worked out, so that the Faculty Council Committee can report on a third of the departments and programs every year.

2. The first element in the outcomes assessment plan is thus the development of small discussion groups of faculty members in the same or closely related fields. Where there are specialties covered by one faculty member, that person could share a personal report with a group in the same department and have some feedback as well as offering response to what others are doing.

3. The second element is the key subject of the opening stages of the discussion: the working out of a list of expected outcomes for each course and of matching means for determining how well students are meeting each of the expectations. The model here is the Department of Speech Communication Arts and Sciences, which appears, on the basis of the inventory reports received by the committee, to be the only department now making a concerted effort to write such lists. (See Appendix 4.) The Modern Languages Department states its intention to do the same. The Conservatory of Music apparently follows a similar procedure but less formally. The faculty may find it difficult to prepare such lists; the exercise will be one of precise statement of both the expected outcomes and the matching means of evaluation.

4. The third element would be the writing of a report of the discussions of the small group, a report initially about movement toward the precise lists described in the preceding paragraph as well as about issues of assessment in the particular field. Subsequently the reports would be about student achievement of the expected outcomes, adjustments as needed to improve statements of
expectations or modes of evaluation, accounts of improvements resulting from assessment, and changes required by developments in the field.

5. Teaching is at the heart of assessment and is something the groups will want to discuss though the issues here tend to be personal and beyond the scope of more or less objective reporting. Nevertheless, when a group hits on a technique that works, it should certainly turn up in the report. The Harvard Assessment Seminars provide a possible model here of collegial reporting, and Brooklyn College established in 1997 a Center for Teaching which already is assuming something of the role of those seminars. Its development should certainly be encouraged to provide a clearing house for good teaching ideas and a forum for stimulating the discovery of more good ideas. It could also provide a base for faculty seminars on the exercise of precise statement mentioned a couple of paragraphs back.

6. The fifth element is the bringing together of the small group reports, first by an Outcomes Assessment Committee in each department. This committee would review and evaluate the group reports and prepare a departmental Outcomes Assessment Report. Such a report would give considerably more substance to the programmatic side of departmental annual reports.

7. The departmental reports would, in turn, go to a Faculty Council Committee on Outcomes Assessment (perhaps an extension of the current Committee on Review of Programs) which would issue an annual report on its findings in the manner of all the standing committees of Faculty Council.

8. As the small group reports move to the departmental and college-wide committees, they should feed into more precise statements of program, departmental, and college objectives. The Faculty Council report should move other Council committees, such as Master Planning, and the college administration in their turn to consider more precisely the focus of the college's operations and the statement of the college's mission. These groups should also provide feedback to the departments.

The work on outcomes assessment in small groups and departments will not stop, of course, during the years when reports are not due. We believe that assessment, though seldom called that, is already a constant topic of conversation among both faculty members and students. The plan aims to give that conversation something of a focus and a shape. There are, in fact, a great many shapes as our inventory of current practices reveals and as is further made clear in a collection like *Assessment in Practice* (Trudy W. Banta *et al*).

The plan presented here does not require anyone at Brooklyn College to follow specific methods of outcomes assessment other than those already in place. It does require that people discuss with others in their own field what they are already doing and be more precise about it than programs are currently being. The expectation is that precision will lead to the discovery of both strengths and weaknesses, to new and better assessment ideas, and ultimately to better teaching and learning.

C. Graduate Program Assessment

Most graduate programs have assessment procedures in place but do not have formally stated assessment plans. Those programs and the students in them have well defined goals, and courses
must present objectives that clearly lead to those goals; when they do not, enrollment begins to drop, and changes are made. Teachers tend to discuss students and their progress, so there is more awareness of what is going on in various courses. The deputy chairs of graduate programs have an opportunity to review student transcripts each semester and must approve student programs and achievements before students are permitted to move to the final stage of assessment, a comprehensive examination or a thesis or both. The need to devise comprehensive examinations and thesis topics requires faculty to make sure that course work is in fact preparation for these culminating tests; there is a potential for constant feedback from the end results to course objectives.

In the process of formulating assessment plans, in the manner described above for undergraduate programs, graduate programs will be more likely to anticipate problems and move to make corrections before problems become acute.

D. An Outcomes Assessment Plan for Basic Skills

The City University of New York has long had in place an assessment plan for basic skills, so long indeed that it has notoriously begun to unravel at some of the branches of the university. CUNY requires all entering students to take assessment tests in mathematics, reading, and writing.

Passing the tests signifies a student's readiness to enter mainstream college courses. In practice, students do enter some mainstream courses while still taking remedial work. Faculty Council supported a limitation of remedial work to one pre-registration intensive course and one semester for 1998-99. Now the CUNY Board of Trustees is seeking to mandate that students must pass all three tests in order to enter Brooklyn College. New tests for advancement to Junior status have also recently been approved.

English, Mathematics, Modern Languages, and Speech teach the required lower level mainstream courses sometimes also considered basic skills courses. Most students are exempted from courses in Modern Languages because of high school work. Most students must take two semesters of English composition.

The first semester, English 1, has a set of specific expected outcomes: clear and correct sentences, paragraph development around a clear topic, overall thematic coherence, ability to summarize reading, and the ability to use quotations from reading. There is, however, no clear assessment of a student's ability to achieve these outcomes. Classes are organized by individual instructors: the latter select readings, create assignments, and grade independently. There is a common topic assigned by the English Department for an "exit test," but the topic asks only for a response to a brief quotation, and the individual instructor grades it.

The department is aware that it needs a more appropriate exit test and is moving in the direction of having students write their final in-class papers on a commonly assigned essay, which would be distributed shortly before the test date. Brooklyn College joined other CUNY colleges in trying out such a test on a few sections in the Spring 1998. A test of this kind fits the Board of Trustees' interest in testing for achievement before a student can move beyond 60 credits.

The issue of grading in English 1 is a difficult one. Several years ago the department tried to have the exit test graded by someone other than the instructor after a massive norming session. The
concept did not work in practice because the norming procedure did not overcome differences in grading attitudes, and an elaborate appeals process resulted in virtually all students getting the grades that their original instructors would have given. So the concept was given up. The Director of Freshman English has attempted to renew norming sessions on an informal basis, but few people attend the sessions.

An apparent solution to this problem is to take the expected outcomes seriously, to require the kinds of papers that will test the ability to meet expectations, to base grades on the ability to meet expectations, and to have a committee review syllabi, paper topics, and final grades and to look at student portfolios to determine why inconsistencies are occurring. This committee should issue an annual report on outcomes assessment in English 1.

The committee would also be in a position to review the effects, from the point of view of outcomes assessment rather than personal evaluation (the work of the English Department's Appointments Committee), of having a large number of adjunct faculty teaching English 1. Most of these adjuncts are graduate students; many of them take a course on teaching composition with the Director of Freshman English. They are eager to acquire teaching experience. Some will attend meetings voluntarily; some will not or cannot. Yet the department has to know how they are meeting the objectives of English 1; their energies and ideas must become part of the process of evaluating and improving the course’s achievements. An Outcomes Assessment Committee for English 1 would be able to bring this group of teachers into the assessment process.

English 2 adds to the expected outcomes of English 1 the additional one of being able to write a research paper. The English Department has recognized that a research paper takes different forms in different disciplines and, with the agreement of Faculty Council, has made the course an upper Sophomore course with a prerequisite of completion of at least one elective in a major field (or completion of 45 credits). All departments have been invited to substitute a course in their majors for English 2. One department (Music) has taken up the invitation in the two years since it was offered. The English Department has run some sections that focus on the humanities or the social sciences, but most sections are identified as "multidisciplinary." Attempts are under way to enlist more departments in the cause. From the outcomes assessment viewpoint, such a course in the major would provide an excellent instrument, enabling a department to measure student development from the introductory effort at research to advanced senior course assignments.

Brooklyn College has to make a special basic skills effort in the field of teaching English as a Second Language. A large number of students do not have English as their first language, and though most of them have graduated from local high schools, they need intensive preliminary work to prepare them for the reading and writing assignments and classroom discussions in the Core Curriculum and in their majors.

The CUNY Assessment Tests in reading and writing have generally been the way out of preparatory ESL courses into mainstream courses. As noted above, the Board of Trustees has been questioning the use of these tests as proficiency tests rather than exclusively as placement tests. The Board has also put a severe limit (fifteen months) on the time that senior colleges can spend on ESL preparation. Not surprisingly, teachers of ESL have become among the most acutely aware students of course objectives and student achievement. They survey themselves and keep careful statistical records of student progress.
The ESL teachers have used their data to construct realistic programs for the ever-shrinking time frames that they have been handed. A problem does remain in the nature of a final assessment of student readiness to move into English 1, Core Curriculum courses, and departmental electives. If the CUNY Assessment Tests are no longer allowed as exit tests (and no one believes that they are reliable), a new procedure will be required. Given the very specific expected outcomes of ESL courses and the willingness to measure student attainments with some exactitude, it would seem that the faculty could devise standard outcomes to be achieved by students as an indication of readiness; a committee of non-ESL teachers could review papers by way of external assessment of the validity of the standard. The ultimate assessment in this case will be the success of students in the mainstream courses; if the success rate is not high, the ESL staff will hear about it, along with specific causes of failure, and will have to make changes.

E. An Outcomes Assessment Plan for General Education

Brooklyn College has had an elegant and renowned Core Curriculum since 1981 to assure that all students, regardless of major, receive a common foundation in the liberal arts and sciences. The "Core" consists of thirteen specially designed courses ranging through the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Oversight of the Core belongs to the Faculty Council Core Curriculum Committee. Each course has a coordinator appointed by the departments participating in the course, who represents and takes responsibility for the particular Core course and guides the discussion among its teaching faculty.

In developing an outcomes assessment plan for the Core, we must respect the way it was conceived and articulated. It was designed to be a coherent entity. There is a cross-referencing and interrelationship of courses that is hard to track; ideally it takes place in the teaching and in the students' own minds, as for example between Core Studies 2.1 and 2.2 (Introduction to Art; Introduction to Music) and the history component, Core Studies 4 (The Shaping of the Modern World), or between social and political science (Core Studies 3, People, Power, and Politics), and the study of non-Western cultures (Core Studies 9, Comparative Studies in African, Asian, Latin American, and Pacific Cultures), or between the classics and philosophy components (Core Studies 1, Classical Origins of Western Culture, and Core Studies 10, Knowledge, Existence, and Values). Additionally the Core was designed to introduce the student to a spectrum of teaching approaches. So some courses, such as Core 9, are conceived as interdisciplinary and are team taught; some, such as Core Studies 5, Introduction to Mathematical Reasoning and Computer Programming, teach a combination of skills and are multidisciplinary, and some, such as Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature, concentrate more on what the Bulletin describes as "definitive human achievements," studied within the discipline of a particular department — in this case the English Department. A mix this ambitious depends on a broadly humanistic liberal arts concept of what an educated person should know.

The major evaluation of the Core to date was issued after analysis could be made of data from two mid-eighties graduating classes. The report was positive with respect to student assessment of the value and interest of the courses and the quality of teaching; a majority of the student respondents did not support the introduction of free choice and would have eliminated none of the thirteen Core courses. On the other hand, criticisms were made of the modular science component and of the team-taught, multidisciplinary, non-Western component for lack of coherence, and of the tier structure in that in the case of most second tier courses that structure was being honored in the breach. These criticisms became the focus of a special retreat in 1988 and were on the subsequent agenda in a summer seminar that followed and over the years.

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However, the results indicate minimal changes. A more recent effort to reconsider the Core's composition ended by abolishing the one structural element in the original concept, the distinction between a lower and upper tier of courses. Overall, the evaluation recommended that any changes be incremental rather than drastic.

The mission of the Core is clear, but it needs a much more precise statement of its goals before its effectiveness can begin to be evaluated. The process has to begin with the courses themselves. As with the majors, faculty engaged in teaching a Core course must begin to discuss the expected outcomes of the course and to agree on some common means of assessing student achievement of expectations. These discussions must involve syllabi, paper topics, test questions, and grading expectations to assure something better than random teaching and learning experiences. Faculty of several Core courses are already doing these things, and the first step would seem to be to have those groups provide written reports to the Core Curriculum Committee, which could then work out models for all the courses. But the hard work of developing precise objectives and methods of assessment of student achievement of those objectives will have to be done for each course, and each course, as in programs for majors, will be expected to produce a triennial report of its assessment activity.

The Core Curriculum Committee seems to be the likely group to take the role of outcomes assessment committee for the Core. Its first task will be to oversee the development of more precise course objectives. Its second task will be to use the more precise course descriptions to develop a more precise and meaningful set of objectives for the Core as a whole. Its third task will be to devise a method of assessing the effectiveness of the Core in conveying those overall objectives to students.

There are many ways of assessing the outcomes of general education programs. Given the varied nature of the courses and the fact that many students take these courses over their entire academic career, it is not possible, and really against the whole spirit of the concept, to require a general education test. At present, to be sure, any college graduates who wish to obtain provisional certification to teach in New York State must pass the New York State Teacher Certification Examination, used to ensure a qualified teaching staff for public school students. It includes a Liberal Arts and Sciences Test (LAST) which was developed, under contract to the state, to assess the broad liberal arts background appropriate for teachers of grades K-12, which may roughly correspond to the goals of the Core. Since the college receives reports of scores on each of the sub-test areas on these tests for all students who report the college as their institution, these tests offer potential as a way to assess the outcomes of the general education program at the college for a fairly large number of students (about 20% of undergraduates). However, there are difficulties in using the Teacher Certification tests as outcomes assessments for the Core Curriculum: detailed analysis of scores versus transcripts is required, for example, to determine what part of the LAST corresponds to what parts of the Core Curriculum and to determine for what courses students have received transfer credit, and it is necessary to determine how prospective teachers fit into the distribution throughout the college of ability and achievement if results of these tests are to be used to assess the Core Curriculum. Considerable analysis was required to determine that Brooklyn College students with a B.A. in Education who had completed the Core had a pass rate on the LAST of over 80%.

The Teacher Certification tests will thus provide much useful information but will not serve as an outcomes assessment instrument for the Core Curriculum. In fact, the committee can do no more than suggest some possible means of assessing the effectiveness of the Core Curriculum: a Senior
test (with reservations as noted above); a capstone course (perhaps better reserved for departments wanting to use it for their majors); a portfolio of the best work done in Core courses and in courses substituted for Core courses; a Senior essay covering at least three Core areas; longitudinal cohort surveys of student self-evaluations (used with satisfaction at SUNY Albany).

For purposes of assessment, the present statement of ideal general objectives, which befits what higher education purports to offer, must be supplemented by a set of expected outcomes in concrete terms that can be more readily measured. Their formulation should be consonant with the aggregated outcomes assessments to be prepared by the faculties of the Core courses.

IV. Surveys

Beginning with a faculty survey in Spring of 1997, Brooklyn College will have run three surveys prepared by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA; a survey of entering freshman was conducted in the Fall of 1997, and a survey of a sampling of Juniors and Seniors was conducted in the Spring of 1998. While these surveys provide much useful data, it is not yet clear that they serve as outcomes assessment tools.

Some of the items in the alumni survey conducted in January 1998 were intended to provide assessment information, particularly retrospective attitudes toward education at Brooklyn College, the usefulness of the major, and the Core Curriculum. An account of the survey results appears in the chapter of the self study on Students.

This kind of polling of graduates should be done by academic programs. Advisers in those programs meet regularly with majors or members of special programs such as the Honors programs; they should establish routines for keeping in touch with graduates in order to get post-graduate evaluations of their programs. Such evaluations are among the strongest assessment instruments. For many programs successful careers are themselves indications of effectiveness while dissatisfaction among graduates may require program adjustments. Graduates can also brief the academy on changing requirements in the world of employers. There is much hearsay about that but very little real evidence; an intense effort should be made to maintain a connection. One result of the consideration of the alumni survey by the Outcomes Assessment Committee was an awareness that faculty wanted to know more about the relation of alumni achievement and reaction to the departments or programs in which they majored. Yet a longer, more detailed and specific college-wide survey would probably get an even smaller response than did the short questionnaire. Departments and programs can conduct more detailed surveys, however, and will find much use in them.