2010-11 Report on Assessment of Non-academic Programs

Prepared by the Faculty Senate Budget and Planning Committee

Introduction

UTK faculty members and academic programs are continuously, thoroughly, and effectively assessed. Students are asked to evaluate our classes, and the results of those evaluations are available online. Each year we document our activities in teaching, research, and service, and on a regular basis our department heads write a narrative about those activities. Our classes with insufficient enrollment are cancelled. Creation of new academic programs requires a thorough vetting process and approval at all levels; “underperforming” programs are subject to a clear process that can lead to elimination. Quality of departments is often subject to external evaluation, such as the recent study by the National Research Council that compares quality of departments in the same field at different universities. Finally, the tenure process provides a rigorous process, often with international reach, to determine whether a particular faculty member warrants continued employment, and in the opposite extreme there are mechanisms for faculty to be fired as a result of chronically performing below expectations.

Assessment and accountability are vital to ensure high performance and cost-effectiveness, and indeed according to data compiled in spring 2010 by the Budget and Planning Committee, University of Tennessee faculty have recently been models of efficiency. Spending in the category of Instruction, which is the category that directly funds the primary activities of our mission as a public university, grew by 14.3% 2005-9, while in the same period, funding in all remaining categories grew by 24.9%. Put another way, compared with the 44.2% share of total expenditures devoted to Instruction in 2005, the 42.1% share in 2009 represents a $22 million diversion from Instruction into other categories. While we have not fully established distribution of funds among campuses, which has been complicated recently by reorganizations within the System, expenditures for System Administration grew by 26% during the same period after adjustments for reorganization. That is, $6 million of the $22 million diverted away from Instruction during the period is attributable to the System Administration, and the rest went to campuses.

Is the relative increase in funding for non-Instruction categories at our university a reflection of weaker standards for assessment of non-academic programs? To help answer this question, in spring 2010 the Budget and Planning Committee sent a letter to administrators of several “support” programs of various sizes, requesting information about goals, assessment plans, results of prior assessment, and plans to make results public. More details concerning the letter and responses that we received are available on request. We will summarize those findings here and make some recommendations.

First, however, we would like to express our appreciation for the time that directors and other personnel took to respond to our request, and we want to be clear that it is not our purpose to find fault with them, who we believe are doing all that has been required by higher administration to justify their programs. It is also not our intention to make any recommendations about whether any of these specific programs should be expanded, contracted, or eliminated—but rather to encourage the addition of transparency and data to the process that leads to such actions. If the only consequence of this report is that some of the programs that we reviewed have their funding adjusted or eliminated, then our effort will largely have failed. What we hope to accomplish is a change in what appears to us to be a culture in which programs are implemented and sustained with little formal effort to determine whether they are cost effective (or even just effective) ways to support our primary missions of teaching, research, and service.

Summary of Findings

Community of Science

“Community of Science” (COS) is a subscription service that, among other things, provides e-mail “funding alerts” to support faculty in their pursuit of research grants. The program has been funded for more than a decade at a total cost (including administrative support) that likely exceeds half a million dollars. Yet until late 2010, no serious effort was ever made to determine the degree to which it is used—or whether the program had led to a single grant application, let alone funding. In contrast, faculty usage of academic journals is continually monitored, and “underused” journals have been cut. By way of assessment, administrators have relied on “usage” data from the product’s vendor, which is described vaguely enough that it was misunderstood by the COS administrator as counting logins by faculty users. In fact, as the vendor eventually told us, the “usage” spreadsheet actually counts mouse clicks, which may occur dozens or even hundreds of times with each login. Usage that was described as “strong” by both the UTK administrator and the vendor in fact amounted to an average per user of one mouse click every two months in 2009. Moreover, our analysis suggests that the vast majority of that activity is created by the Office of Research, and not individual faculty. The Office of Research eventually did do a survey of grant awardees in Fall 2010 (and plans more assessment in the future), which revealed that 2.6% of respondents were able to attribute the grant to an individual COS funding search.

More importantly, the survey provides valuable information about how UTK faculty find their funding opportunities (most common ways: individual search of sponsor websites, 39.2% and word of mouth, 37.9%, and other, 37.9%). Now shouldn’t a survey like this precede any new effort to support faculty in their search for opportunities? Indeed the survey reveals a risk that newer faculty who come to believe that they can rely on COS announcements to be fully informed about research opportunities may forego the ways in which the vast majority of funding opportunities really discovered, possibly leading to decreased funding.

An e-mail conversation with a vendor representative revealed the following fascinating fact: no administrator, to her knowledge, had ever actually asked what the “usage” data were measuring. In fact she had to check with the company’s technicians to discover the meaning of the data. This means that tens of millions of dollars are being spent by dozens of universities for this product, while administrators don’t even know what the supporting data mean! In the words of the rep: “I think that the assumption is then, if faculty are using the database, then the chances for increased funding dollars go up.” Imagine what would happen to a research grant proposal built on such a sloppy foundation! Don’t students and taxpayers (and faculty) have a right to a higher standard than this?

Math Tutorial Center

The Math Tutorial center facilitates tutoring by undergraduates to undergraduates, providing experience to tutors and support for tutees. The MTC currently assesses student satisfaction in several ways, collects this data, and uses it to provide feedback to tutors and to help improve services. The data had not yet been made public when we asked about it, but there were plans to do so. MTC could benefit from a more rigorous assessment plan but is making a good effort so far. The directors clearly see the benefits of public assessment of their program, for example in assuring parents that their children who attend UTK will have access to good support if needed for their mathematics classes. Specific data that could be collected in the future include student perceptions (and possibly even grade data) concerning performance in classes.

OIT HelpDesk

The OIT HelpDesk (and other OIT services) provided the gold standard for assessment at UTK among those programs that we observed. The HelpDesk has clear goals and assessment data is continually collected and made public. Data involves both numbers of people served, and their level of satisfaction.

Student Success Center

The SSC serves a similar purpose to the Math Tutorial center, but on a larger scale, covering wider range of topics, and with a broader mission (such as identifying at-risk students as opposed to waiting for them to drop in for help). In response to our solicitation we were provided with a clear set of goals and what appears to be a robust assessment plan, including important metrics such as “before/after” comparisons of student grades. However, we were not provided with any results of this assessment, and this data does not seem to be publicly available to those who do not attend presentations that the director has made to several groups.

Teaching and Learning Center

We received a cover with general information, goals and strategies from a 2-year strategic plan, and a spreadsheet with some data. There is no numerical data in the spreadsheet, which consists essentially of a list of activities that were carried out—no indication of the number of participants, and no survey information from participants. The cover letter indicates an expectation that data such as this will be collected in the future. The goals (objectives) are mainly lists of activities as opposed to what, generally, those activities intend to accomplish and specific, verifiable impacts on learning. A “logic model” lists very general, non-quantitative goals such as producing “changes in awareness”.

The main assessment plan seems to be to survey participants of workshops and other activities sponsored by the TLC. This assessment method raises immediate questions that are connected to the goals of the activities of the TLC. To what degree do these activities impact our teaching mission, which has as its goal the education of students? For example, participants in a teaching workshop assessed by TLC overwhelmingly stated that they would be able to apply in the classroom at least one activity learned at the workshop. But what is the ultimate impact on students? Do students perceive, appreciate, and benefit in a measurable way from those activities? Is the goal to produce satisfied, engaged workshop participants, or to produce measurable improvements in learning? If actual improvements in learning cannot be measured, then what is the justification, to students and taxpayers, for these kinds of activities?

Conclusions and Recommendations

Assessment of the programs that we surveyed ranged from robust to nearly non-existent, and was often below a level that we believe to be sufficient to make informed decisions about the budgets of these programs. We believe there may be a connection between the level of assessment in non-academic programs and declines in the percentage of expenditures in the category of Instruction, in which assessment and accountability are strong. We recommend the following concrete steps:

- The System and our campus should give a public accounting that identifies why the relative cost of providing secondary support to Instruction grew significantly during FY05-09, extended through FY11 as data become available and the impacts of ARRA funds are clarified. This accounting should include explicitly the degree to which salary increases were involved.
- The campus and System should work to create a four-year plan to restore the percentage of expenditures falling in the category of Instruction to at least the 2005 level (44.2% of total expenditures, factoring in the movement of funds among categories), by some combination of cuts in non-Instruction categories and more rapid increases in spending on Instruction.
- In order to guide any budget cutting and help control the future growth of expenditures, the university should create a taskforce to develop guidelines for implementation of university-wide assessment of non-academic programs. Individual programs should develop a set of goals and assessment plans incorporating the following general principles.

Assessment Principles

1. The purpose of the program should be clearly articulated and justified.
2. Goals should be stated as outcomes, not lists of actions.
3. Goals should be measurable.
4. Assessment for support programs should include survey information concerning amount of, and satisfaction with, support.
5. Actions should be connected directly to specific goals.
6. Actions should include cost estimates.
7. Circumstances under which actions are to be discontinued should be clearly stated.
8. Assessment should measure, as directly as possible, level of attainment of goals.
9. Assessment should not simply assert that intended activities took place but should evaluate what was accomplished by those actions.
10. Goals, actions, and results of assessment should be publicized, at least in aggregate form.
11. The relationship between the program and other programs with closely related goals should be clearly described and duplication of effort avoided.
12. Programs of a sort that are self-supporting through external sources at some other universities should have a plan to become self-supporting at UTK.