Assessment of Student Achievement

At University of the Cumberlands, we analyze student learning and achievement as part of our continuous self-evaluation of our academic programs. Our strategies for measuring student achievement most notably include the following:

- Tracking of student learning using capstone assessments of program completers, including scores on student portfolios and test results on nationally distributed instruments, such as ETS field examinations or Area Concentration Achievement Tests.
- Comparison of junior versus first-year performance on the Proficiency Profile to evaluate student achievement through the General Education curriculum.
- Evaluation of the Proficiency Profile results against aggregated means for comparable institutions.
- Evaluation of the results of completers and alumni on licensure exams, most notably in teacher education programs and in professional graduate programs such as Physician Assistant Studies.
- Review of enrollment, retention and graduation data, especially comparative analysis of undergraduate IPEDS data reported by peer institutions.

The thresholds of student success determined by the University on these and other measures have been established in the context of our Mission to offer “a broad-based liberal arts education to promising students of all backgrounds.” This student context is summarized in part by these demographics:

- Approximately half of incoming first-year students are the first-generation in their immediate families to attend college.
- More than 50% of current undergraduate students with financial aid qualify for PELL grants.
- The vast majority of incoming undergraduate students come from central Appalachia.
- Normally about 10% of incoming first-year students are conditionally admitted with entrance test scores below regular entry requirements.
- The average ACT composite for current incoming first-year students (2014) is 22.4, 2.5 points above the Kentucky ACT composite of 19.9 and 1.4 points higher than the average national ACT composite score of 21.0.

With this entering student demographic, roughly 25-33% of University’s undergraduate completers move on immediately to post-baccalaureate studies, with an additional 33% doing so within ten years.

This challenging academic and socioeconomic background of the University’s undergraduate population provides the context against which we pursue our academic mission, assess student achievement and evaluate the success of academic programs.

Discipline-Specific Assessments of Student Achievement. As indicated in the Annual Assessment Summary, 20 of 27 undergraduate programs and 4 of 7 graduate disciplines require graduating students to take ETS Major Field Tests, Area of Concentration Achievement Tests (ACAT), PRAXIS examinations, or similar standardized tests to measure student achievement. On normative measures (such as PRAXIS tests), cut scores provided by external agencies are used as standards for student success. On other measures (such as ETS and ACAT tests), programs compare the composite performance of local completers with the aggregate performance by students nationally, usually setting the 50th percentile (i.e., the national median performance) as the threshold for student success and the benchmark for program effectiveness. Benchmarks are determined and regularly reviewed by each program based upon an ongoing evaluation of student performance on the capstone measure in the context of other academic assessments.

Institution-Wide Assessment of Undergraduate Student Achievement. We are committed to nurturing undergraduate student achievement through our General Education curriculum. To this end, annual testing of both incoming students and juniors provides important data for program assessment.
One hundred sixty-two juniors were given the ETS Proficiency Profile in February 2014. Despite the fact that we accept students from a broad range of abilities, the mean total UC score of 441.42 was only 1.54 points lower than the national sample mean of 442.96. In addition, recent comparisons of the scores of UC juniors with their performances on the same assessments as freshmen found statistically significant increases. In 2012, this comparison yielded a mean increase of 5.56 points (p<0.037); in 2013, a mean increase of 3.42 points (p<0.031); and in 2014, a mean increase of 4.52 points (p<0.001). Collectively these data provide evidence of the “value-added” intellectual growth experienced by UC students through the University’s academic programs.

The University also tracks a variety of data on a term-by-term and year-by-year basis, including enrollment data, as well as retention and graduation data. Ten peer institutions* have been identified to aid in our evaluation of retention and graduation data. The University’s peer group is comprised of private liberal arts institutions in our general region which are similar in size and student demographic. However, included in the group are some institutions with qualities to which the University aspires, as well as others for whom the University may be a model. Within the diversity of this peer group, we strive to be above the 40th percentile on these statistical measures.

IPEDS information provides much data for comparison, including enrollment headcount, number of degrees awarded, the percentage of undergraduates eligible for federal aid, the current graduation rate, the first-time student retention rate, as well as the 4-, 6-, and 8-year graduation rates. Particular attention is paid to retention of first-year full-time students and to the six-year graduation rate. These data sets are particularly relevant considering the demographic profile of the University’s student population (highlighted above), our rural environment, and our mission to the region. In these contexts, the University seeks to be in the upper 60% among its peer group, with retention and graduation rates near the peer group mean.

The University’s most recent Retention Rate for First-Year Students (2013-2014) was 60%. For 2008-2013, the University’s Retention of First-Year Students averaged 59%. The composite average of its peer group was 64%, with UC outperforming 50% of the peer group on this measure. Over a similar period, the University’s 6-year graduation rate averaged 40%, compared with the peer group’s composite of 42%, with UC outperforming 60% of the peer group on this measure.

As indicated by these and other data measuring student success, at University of the Cumberlands we remain committed to meeting students where they are academically while facilitating their intellectual growth toward authentic collegiate achievement.