

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The Penn Compact and the Self-Study Final Report

The purpose of this Self-Study was to explore and evaluate undergraduate education through the prism of the Penn Compact and propose directions that could improve the educational experiences of Penn undergraduates. The Compact provides a vision for the University, a foundation for looking beyond the daily activities of teaching, research and service to examine longer term goals and aspirations. The Self-Study examined Penn's priorities and asked: are our aspirations being met?

The answer to that question is unequivocally "yes." Penn has set ambitious goals for undergraduate education over the past decade, and this Self-Study is an impressive record of Penn's achievement of those goals. Each chapter has detailed the ways in which the University currently provides students an uncommonly rich environment for the study of the arts and sciences and professional fields.

In keeping with its highest institutional priorities, Penn has significantly increased the diversity and excellence of its undergraduate student body, while making educational opportunities more accessible to all students regardless of financial need. Having more than doubled its financial aid budget in recent years, it is today the largest university in the nation to offer a need-based, no-loan financial aid program, while consistently achieving four- and six- year graduation rates that are among the very highest anywhere. Tuition increases over the past decade have been lower, on average, than those at other private and public institutions; and in constant dollars, the net charge for aided first-year undergraduate students has actually declined over this period.

Penn undergraduates are deeply engaged both locally and globally, pursuing opportunities to connect with communities in Philadelphia and around the world, and they are routinely crossing disciplinary boundaries to integrate knowledge. Academically Based Community Service courses have grown dramatically over the past decade. Virtually all graduating seniors report having participated in co-curricular activities, with two of every five reporting engagement in community volunteer work. The large majority of undergraduates engage in significant research activities, and about two thirds complete a minor, dual major, or multiple majors that involve integrating knowledge across schools and disciplines. Penn considers these opportunities—local and global engagement, integrating knowledge, and undergraduate research—hallmarks of a Penn undergraduate education. We hope students will pursue these opportunities as part of their education, not as a requirement to earn a degree (as these are not required or expected outcomes) but as part of their immersive experience of Penn. Because the University values these activities, we want Penn students to value and undertake them as well.

Such opportunities are clearly distinct from the assessment of the student learning required to earn a degree. Penn's institutional practice of ongoing assessment at multiple levels, in particular school-based evaluation programs and assessments of student learning, demonstrates that the University provides exemplary learning experiences for undergraduates. This systematic attention to the student academic experience, both inside and outside the classroom, has paid dividends over the past decade. Student satisfaction with advising and other services has increased dramatically in the past ten years. Each of

Penn's three undergraduate professional schools maintains a national reputation for excellence and continues to meet or exceed external accrediting standards, while the School of Arts and Sciences has implemented thoughtful new assessments of student learning that conform to the expectations articulated in MSCHE's Standard 14 and offer a model for comparable schools and colleges. Most recently, Penn's global leadership in open learning, and its commitment to active-learning methods, have invigorated teaching and learning across campus, as reflected in an innovative, cross-school program exploring new and more effective means of teaching in introductory STEM courses.

In addition to these positive findings, the Self-Study offers a thoughtful account of how we might approach the specific priorities and values that will define the institution's future. Each working group confronted the challenge of examining a specific topic in a wide-ranging, complex environment in which central processes and units work with, and perhaps on occasion compete with, the educational missions and goals of schools and programs. Some of the most useful work was definitional. The working groups for Undergraduate Research and Integrating Knowledge produced thoughtful, clear working definitions for their topics. The working groups for Global Engagement, Local Engagement, and Access and Equity explored key terms of their topic to illuminate Penn's progress in these areas and create foundations for further analysis. All the working groups confronted the distinction between gathering information about a topic and thinking through that information in ways that produce useful analysis and ideas for improvement.

As a plan of action, the Self-Study Final Report provides a set of recommendations, many of which encourage the University to continue to advance its most critical initiatives or to strengthen the coordination of specific priorities. Given that assessment is defined in Standard 7 as a step in an ongoing process, the sense of work yet to be done is appropriate and a strength of the Report. Indeed, the recent introduction of the Penn Compact 2020, the University's renewed vision for the years ahead, affirms this link between ongoing assessment and Penn's vision for the future.

A Vision for Assessing Undergraduate Education

The concept of assessing undergraduate education that informs this Self-Study is that the responsibility for assessing the overall effectiveness of undergraduate education is shared by the administration of the four schools and the central administration of the University, while the assessment of student learning rests with the faculty of individual schools and programs. This approach follows Penn's academic organization into twelve distinct schools, each with a specific educational mission and collection of degree programs. Although Penn is often described as decentralized, a more accurate description in the context of undergraduate education is that Penn is served by a decentralized organization combined with strong central processes that address the specific needs of four undergraduate schools and their students.

This kind of structure demands transparent decision-making processes that represent the interests of both the individual schools and the institution as a whole. It also requires that assessment of student learning be led by the faculty and occur in the context of a school or discipline. Such assessment will be most effective when it is connected to peer review by faculty from other institutions. External peer review allows for deeper understanding of the problems and practices in a specific field of study and encourages the sharing of new ideas across institutions.

Assessment of student learning is necessarily focused on the goals of a field of study and embedded in a program of study leading to a degree. Course goals, learning outcomes, and the like are grounded in the norms and expectations of a field of study as constituted by scholars in the field and expressed in a course or collection of courses. As demonstrated in assessment reports from each of the four undergraduate schools, Penn excels in assessing student learning. The Self-Study Steering Committee carefully reviewed the College of Arts and Sciences Assessment Report (Appendix 7.1), written to address MSCHE's request (in accepting our Periodic Review Report in 2009) that Penn document in its next decennial self-study "that in the School of Arts and Sciences 1) assessment of student learning has been implemented in all departments and programs and 2) assessment results are used to improve teaching and learning." We believe that this report documents a sustained and ongoing assessment process in the School of Arts and Sciences that demonstrates compliance with MSCHE Standard 14 and can serve as a model for other universities in assessing student learning in the arts and sciences.

Assessment of learning, the type of assessment described in Standard 14, is distinct from the kind of institutional assessment described in Standard 7. Yet, as *Standards of Excellence* states, "the assessment of student learning is an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness" (63). In one way, the relationship between the two kinds of assessment is straightforward. The institution ensures the quality of its programs by organizing a system of school-based reviews (including external peer reviews) and uses that system to support improvements in teaching and learning. Such a system is in place at Penn as described in Chapter 7: Assessment of Student Learning and documented in the appendices and document repository for the Self-Study.

But this description does not fully account for the interplay between the two forms of assessment. How do institutional values and goals relate to the learning experiences of students? Or, to put the question in Penn's institutional vocabulary, what does the Penn Compact mean for the assessment of student learning? The challenge to answering such questions begins with the breadth and complexity of our educational offerings. Penn's diversity of educational opportunities includes the professional focus of three of its undergraduate schools and, in the College, a commitment to broad, socially relevant inquiry in the arts and sciences. This wide range of offerings makes the articulation of institution-wide learning goals an exercise in abstraction rather than a ground for meaningful assessment.

For example, as indicated in Chapter 4: Global Engagement, global engagement can mean different things depending on the educational context and field of study. The natural, physical, and social sciences, as well as engineering, are fields of study which define themselves as global, even universal, in their fundamental questions and practices. The humanities, however, might define global engagement as the intensive study of an archive located on campus but originally from a region outside North America. Nursing or business might require hands-on study of the profession in a location outside the United States. Expecting each of these disciplines to identify a learning goal that reflects global engagement would be a bureaucratic exercise in abstraction, rather than an assessment of learning grounded in the goals and practices of a field of study.

The Self-Study included a thought experiment, described in Chapter 7: Assessment of Student Learning, in which the Assessment of Student Learning Working Group imagined a set of institutional learning goals that would be drawn from the curricular goals of the four schools and the University's overall institutional goals. As the group's conclusions suggest, the wide range of programs at Penn requires a different approach to assessment than one might find at a smaller liberal arts college or professional school. Institutional flexibility in determining methods of institutional assessment is important to effectively meet regulatory and accreditation requirements. This is particularly true of the assessment of student learning, which, at Penn, requires giving schools and program the flexibility to assess learning in the ways that best account for their specific goals and the norms of their fields of study.

If the practices of a specific field of study are the primary basis for assessing student learning, then what role do institutional values and goals play in student learning? We believe the answer to this question speaks to the great strength of research universities and, indeed, to Penn's great strength as a research university. Penn is more than a collection of fields of study and much more than the sum of its parts. Rather, Penn is a place where knowledge is created and taught, a place where fields of study collide and combine, a place where intellectual diversity flourishes, and a place where students become experts and learn how to wield that expertise to shape the world.

As Chapter 5: Integrating Knowledge suggests, these collisions and combinations can be realized most productively by forging connections across disciplines, rather than by breaking down the walls separating all disciplines. If Penn embodies the notion of the university as a network of distinct disciplines connected via discourse, research, and engagement, then the connections themselves necessarily take different forms. Some of them may be broadly conceived, yet all are realized in specific courses and educational opportunities. Many connections may be realized not in the curriculum or co-curriculum at all, but in the individual experiences of students. For one student, this experience may take the form of a senior thesis that draws on two or more fields of study. A Penn professional school student may take a course in the arts and sciences and discover connections that enable a new and unique angle of vision. A humanities or science major may enroll in a course in one of Penn's professional schools that brings together ideas in a way that puts that student on a new path toward a career.

No matter how comprehensive, assessment at the institutional level cannot fully account for the range and specificity of the educational experiences of students. Certainly, data and information about institutional priorities can be gathered and analyzed. However, assessment of undergraduate education is not simply a matter of gathering data and analyzing it. Properly understood, assessment involves connecting institutional priorities to useful data and effective analysis. Effective assessment will result in improvements, general and specific, that align the institution with its priorities and respond to changes external to the institution. At the same time, the institution does have a responsibility and duty—which Penn accepts and discharges—to ensure that each of its constituent schools and programs aligns with the institutional mission, articulates specific ways in which the school and program goals reflect that mission, and routinely and rigorously assesses its performance.

Major Recommendations

The Self-Study, which draws on the excellent contributions of the seven working groups, supports a set of strategic considerations and six major recommendations, which are elaborated in each chapter and summarized here.

- 1) Penn's successful outreach in admissions should continue in ways that further increase the diversity and excellence of its applicants, with a particular focus on applications from underrepresented minority students, including LGBT students, and students eligible for Pell grants. In light of Penn's all-grant, no-loan policy, all students who know early in their senior year that they want to enroll at Penn can and should be encouraged to apply for early decision.
- 2) In light of the fact that Penn's endowment can pay for only about 20 percent of the University's undergraduate financial aid expense (the rest of which must be paid from Penn's operating budget), and given Penn's on-going commitment to funding the full financial need of all its undergraduates, development initiatives should continue to increase the endowment income available to fund financial aid. In addition, efforts should continue to raise endowment targeted to international applicants from low- and middle-income families. This would increase the number of international applicants that Penn can afford to support, allowing more students from around the world greater access to a Penn education. Increasing endowment income for financial aid would also free up resources available to our undergraduate schools for key research and educational activities.
- 3) Penn ought to strengthen the coordination of its local and national engagement initiatives for undergraduates. The Office of the Provost, the Council of Deans, the Council of Undergraduate Deans, and the Undergraduate Working Group should work with the leaders of Penn's three major centers of community engagement (Civic House, Fox Leadership Program, and Netter Center) on methods for improving communication to first-year students and coordinating efforts to collect and analyze information about the local and national engagement activities of Penn undergraduates.
- 4) Penn should continue its emphasis on integrating knowledge and encouraging cross-school study for undergraduates. With this aim in mind, the Office of the Provost, the Council of Deans, the Council of Undergraduate Deans, and the Undergraduate Working Group can work to develop means to strengthen the review of cross-school and interdisciplinary programs, plan for new programs, and improve efforts to collect and analyze information about the ways in which Penn undergraduates integrate knowledge across campus.
- 5) To strengthen the coordination of research opportunities for undergraduates, the Provost should create a faculty working group, convened jointly by the Vice Provost for Education and the Vice Provost for Research. This group would seek to extend and improve methods of collecting and analyzing information about undergraduate research and help coordinate cross-school efforts to promote undergraduate research to students and faculty, especially in the graduate and professional schools.

- 6) Penn should continue to lead instructional innovation, including developing new methods of active classroom learning and using open learning initiatives to stimulate new forms of teaching and learning on campus. Central to this effort will be continued collaboration among the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Penn Libraries, and the Penn Open Learning Initiative, carefully coordinated by the Office of the Provost and in regular communication with the Council of Deans and the Council of Undergraduate Deans.

These recommendations align with the values articulated in the Penn Compact 2020—inclusion, innovation, and impact. The first two recommendations focus on inclusion by following through on the promise of the all-grant, no-loan policy to help all students benefit from access to a Penn education. All the recommendations—especially the third, fourth, and fifth ones—focus on the impact of Penn’s undergraduate education. Strengthening the evaluation and coordination of initiatives in local engagement, integrating knowledge, and undergraduate research will help Penn understand and increase the impact of our most critical efforts. The sixth recommendation focuses on innovation, particularly in the University’s core work of teaching and learning, so that Penn continues to lead in developing active, in-class learning methods and new technologies of online open learning. Taken together, the six recommendations articulate Penn’s key priorities for undergraduate education and suggest a path forward for the planning and assessment of undergraduate education at Penn over the next decade.