

# **Thomas M. Cooley Law School ASSESSMENT PLAN**

## **Introduction**

Assessment is important to us for the following reasons: (1) we need to know how we are doing in order to improve what we do, to stop doing what does not work, and to identify areas where we might do something new; (2) the Strategic Plan requires us to evaluate our progress in its implementation and many of the Board's initiatives require us to assess and evaluate; and (3) our accrediting agencies mandate assessment.

We need to assess whether we are fulfilling the mission, whether we are achieving the vision, and how we can do both of these better. The assessment function is designed to help us monitor current practices, and changes that we have implemented to determine how effective we are at our endeavors.

To do this, the school must develop and implement a plan for objective, coordinated assessment. The Office of Planning, Programs and Assessment developed a draft plan that has a goal of periodically assessing all parts of our institution, then providing meaningful feedback to all constituents in a timely fashion for the purpose of evaluating all aspects of our programs, and using this feedback to provide continued improvements. This plan was unanimously approved by the Teaching, Learning Assessing Committee and becomes effective in Trinity Term 2003.

## **History**

In 1996, the Board of Directors of Thomas M. Cooley Law School authorized the school to apply for North Central Association (NCA) accreditation. That same year, several Cooley staff members attended their first NCA annual meeting in Chicago. They discovered that several other universities were using a broad conceptual approach to institutional effectiveness and came back to Cooley's campus planners encouraging such an approach for Cooley's NCA Institutional Planning Processes.

After a series of discussion with campus planners and Cooley employees, those staff members discovered that Cooley was already engaged in a number of assessment activities, but the activities were not coordinated into a comprehensive plan that would lead to ongoing improvements in the curriculum, courses, or the Law School itself. Institutional assessment, per se, needed attention it had not received to that point.

In 1998, the Dean assigned a faculty committee, the Planning, Technology, Information, and Evaluation (PTIE) Committee the task of drafting an NCA self-study and other planning documents.

The PTIE Committee discussed and implemented a planning process for the self study. The Dean delegated planning beyond the self-study to a designated coordinator, the Associate Dean of Planning and Programs. The Associate Dean and the PTIE Committee discussed many planning issues during the process of drafting the NCA self-study. Some definitions that could aid in Institutional Planning resulted from that Committee's work

At the Thomas M. Cooley Law School, assessing institutional effectiveness is defined in the following way:

“In whatever activities we find ourselves engaged (teachers, secretaries, administrators, librarians, operations staff, etc.), we accomplish the goals, outcomes, and purposes of that role. We need to ascertain how we are doing in accomplishing goals, outcomes, and purposes so that we can improve what we do, stop doing activities that don't further our goals, outcomes, and purposes, and identify new areas of activity that will further them.”

The Committee members worked with others on campus to set out a series of tasks intended to ensure institutional effectiveness. These include:

- Establishing or Defining Intended Outcomes for all Departments and Entities in the Law School that will Enhance the School's Effectiveness
- Ensuring that Departments and Entities Conduct Activities or Tasks with Outcomes in Mind
- Assessing Whether Those Activities Produced the Desired Outcomes
- Implementing Improvements to Enhance Effectiveness

In January 2002, the President revised the School's committee structure. The responsibilities of the PTIE committee were assigned to the new Teaching, Learning, Assessing Committee. The Committee includes representatives of the faculty, staff, and students, and is charged with the responsibility of carrying out the Assessment Plan, including the above tasks. The President also restructured the Office of Planning and Programs, adding a full-time coordinator of Institutional Research to assist in developing appropriate assessment measures and implementing them effectively.

### **Purposes and Assumptions of Institutional Effectiveness Activities**

Institutional effectiveness activities are undertaken with three broad purposes: IMPROVEMENT INNOVATION and ACCOUNTABILITY:

**Improvement:** This is the most important purpose of the institutional effectiveness process. Finding ways to better achieve intended outcomes will make the Law School, “recognized as the biggest, best, and cheapest Law School in the nation,” a value that is reflected in the School's Vision Statement.

**Innovation:** In order to continue to survive and thrive, Cooley Law School must react quickly to changes in legal education and strive to be a leader.

**Accountability:** The Law School must answer to the entities that provide its resources; its Board of Directors, its President, its students, and its alumni. Additionally, in our NCA accreditation report,

evaluators stated that the Law School must move immediately to develop and implement an institution-wide quality assurance/institutional planning program. The Law School is attempting to comply with that mandate by putting into place and initiating this Plan for Institutional Effectiveness.

### **Five-Year Cycle**

Although these tasks could be accomplished in a variety of ways, the institution has determined that it can most effectively meet its goals by instituting a five-year cycle of institutional effectiveness:

1. Year One – establish a Strategic Plan that encapsulates and furthers the mission statement; Thomas M. Cooley’s long-standing institution-wide statement of purpose and goals.
2. Year Two – designate which academic and administrative departments will draft “statements of intended outcomes” that link thematically to the goals of the strategic plan and the mission statement. Also, ask each department to work with the Office of Planning, Programs, and Assessment to devise methods to assess their intended outcomes incorporating, to the extent possible, information gathered for previous ABA and NCA self-studies, and from other Cooley-developed measures.
3. Year Three – assist the departments in implementing the assessment methods they have devised and in analyzing that data to determine how effectively they are achieving their intended outcomes. During this period, the departments will also plan improvements to processes, in order to enhance their effectiveness in meeting outcomes. Assessment results will be used internally as needed, and Comprehensive Assessment Reports will be issued once each term, providing all members of the institution information about ongoing assessment projects, results of past assessment efforts, and suggestions for changes.
4. Year Four – continue implementing the assessment methods and reporting.
5. Year Five -- the mission statement and strategic plan should be re-visited in light of assessment activities and improvements implemented, and the statements are updated and re-drafted.

### **Format**

To simplify the assessment process, each reporting group in the Law School shall prepare an assessment plan.

### **Process Used in Developing Plan**

In establishing its assessment plan, each unit shall seek input from affected faculty, staff, and students, alumni, and others, as appropriate. The Officer of Planning, Programs, and Assessment will assist each unit in developing and implementing its plan. The plan shall include:

**1. Desired Outcomes**

Each plan shall specify the outcomes desired in specific terms.

**2. Measurement Techniques**

The department, in consultation with the Office of Planning, Programs, and Assessment, will identify appropriate assessment techniques for measuring the desired outcomes.

**3. Collection of Data**

The department, after consultation with the Office of Planning, Programs, and Assessment, will collect and maintain the underlying data in a manner that assures both the integrity and the confidentiality of the data, and insures that use of the data is limited to approved purposes.

**4. Analysis**

The Office of Planning, Programs, and Assessment shall assist the unit in preparing an analysis of the data collected.

**5. Distribution and Discussion**

A summary of the analysis of information gathered will be reported back to the department's director or chair, to the Teaching, Learning, Assessing Committee, and to such other committees as TLA deems appropriate.

**6. Timetable for Implementation**

At a minimum, assessment results will be reported to the TLA committee each year beginning 2003. This information shall be used each year in evaluating what changes are needed to fulfill the strategic goals of the school.

**7. Resources and Support Needed**

The TLA shall identify resources needed each year to fully implement the assessment plan.

**Reporting**

To keep the law school community fully apprised of comprehensive assessment efforts, the Office of Planning, Programs and Assessment shall prepare one report each term summarizing ongoing assessment efforts, results, and the entities to whom the assessment reports have been given. An annual report shall be provided to the President and made available to all members of the institution.

