The faculty members of the department of special education continuously review various types of program data to ensure that 1) the program continues to meet the educational needs of teacher education candidates, 2) the curriculum is consistent with current research, best practices, and legal/educational policy guidelines, and 3) graduates have developed the skills needed to be exceptional educators. Discussions related to program assessment and improvements are held in different venues throughout the academic year including: retreats, faculty meetings, committee meetings, and ad-hoc committee meetings. A brief summary of some of those assessment activities follows.

Section 1: Program Assessment System Transition Point Assessments

Admission: Requirements for admission include a 2.75 GPA, successful WEST-B scores and an application essay. The essay section of the application is evaluated for content and style by members of the department admissions committee. Each potential teacher candidate’s entire application is reviewed by one committee member who then makes a recommendation to the full admissions committee.

First Block: The department has three courses that students take concurrently during the second quarter following admission to the special education program. These three courses have shared assignments, each of which is evaluated independently by the faculty teaching the courses. Performance-based assignments in the two content classes are evaluated using a scoring rubric. The rubric contains items tied specifically to the objectives of each of the two content courses. Ratings on items related to lesson planning and instruction are averaged and reported as a single performance score for SPED 420. Ratings on rubric items measuring classroom management skills are averaged and reported as the performance score for SPED 460. Candidates are observed on at least two formal occasions while teaching in a P-12 practicum setting. Rubric scores across observations are averaged to create the performance score for the practicum SPED 440. All course instructors receive training in use of the rubrics to ensure inter-observer reliability of the ratings.

Reading Block: Reading block consists of a set of two courses, one content course and a P-12 practicum. A rubric specific to reading instruction was developed for the two course reading block. Observations of teaching are videotaped and later scored. Feedback on the observations is given verbally and in writing. A small group of teacher candidates meets with the course instructor to review their videotapes and obtain instructor and peer feedback. The practicum score is calculated by averaging the rubric scores from the video-taped observations. A score summarizing performance on in-class assignments is calculated for the content course.
Final block: Final block includes three courses, two content courses and one P-12 practicum. A single score, based on the rubric for the program’s culminating project, is reported to capture performance in the two content courses. For this project, each teacher candidate selects or is assigned a student in his or her practicum setting in need of academic intervention. The candidate conducts assessments, designs an intervention, and monitors the student’s progress for an academic quarter. This project is presented to faculty, other teacher candidates, and members of the community. Three faculty members independently evaluate each candidate’s intervention and presentation and assign a score using a rubric. All course instructors have been trained to reliability score performance in the final presentations. The scores of the three evaluators are then averaged to create the final course score.

Student internship: Each teacher candidate is observed weekly by a supervisor and his or her cooperating teacher and is provided with feedback about his or her performance. The supervisor conducts formal evaluations at midterm and at the end of the internship in collaboration with the teacher candidate and cooperating teacher. Both scores are reported for program evaluation.

Section 2: Use of Data for Improvements of Programs and/or Operations

Program Improvement

• Review of undergraduate curriculum: Practicum sequence

The special education major consists of a tightly aligned and sequential set of courses. Review and revision of curriculum and course outcomes relative to our program outcomes is an ongoing activity. Based on data collected from departmental faculty last year (2010-11), we identified a lack of shared understanding among faculty about the timing and sequence of opportunities provided throughout the program supporting development of candidates’ planning, instruction, assessment, management, and collaborative skills. To address this lack of common understanding, this year we conducted a thorough examination of our practicum courses. Our initial task was to determine when skills are being introduced, how many opportunities candidates have to develop and practice skills, and what expectations faculty who teach at different points in the program have about how fully developed skills should be prior to entering their course(s). Once we had a shared understanding of what was actually happening in different courses, we collectively created a sequence of skill introduction and practice that would lead to the most efficient and effective mastery of important teaching-related skills. Based on the newly articulated sequence, implementation of changes to the first practicum experience in the program began in fall 2012.

• Development of a Masters in Teaching degree program in special education

This year we completed the necessary curriculum development and will apply for HEC Board approval to offer this program. It is our hope that we can begin offering this program in the fall of 2014.

Improvement of operations

• Revision of procedures for addressing concerns about candidate performance

An explicit policy regarding a standardized manner in which concerns about candidate performance will be addressed was developed and accepted by departmental faculty during the 2010-11 academic year and implementation began in fall 2011. This policy details steps in a
problem solving and/or progressive discipline process in a way that is clear and transparent to both faculty and candidates. Data collected throughout the 2011-12 academic year indicate that the policy has been effective in addressing concerns about candidate earlier than had occurred previously, resulting in improved outcomes. Earlier identification of concerns has, for most candidates, resulted in corrective action being taken early enough to permit successful progress in the program. For several candidates, early identification of problems has lead to recognition on the candidate’s part that teaching is not the best fit for his or her skills and interests and these students were successfully counseled into other majors.

- Advising

Prior to the 2010-11 academic year, newly admitted teacher candidates were an assigned a faculty advisor with whom they were required to meet once per quarter. Scheduling of individual appointments with this degree of frequency proved difficult for both candidates and faculty advisors. Group advising sessions for orientation and scheduling issues were implemented this year. Candidates meet with their individual advisors for more in-depth problem solving and counseling if needed but group sessions have dramatically improved the efficiency of advising.

Improvement of assessment practices

- Training of new practicum supervisors to ensure inter-observer reliability on practicum observation rubrics

Reliability of scoring on observation rubrics among practicum supervisors was established in a series of studies done during the 2010-11 academic year. As new supervisors are hired, training in use of scoring rubrics is required to ensure that scores assigned by different observers are, indeed, interchangeable. The meaning of each item and level of performance required for each possible score value must be discussed with each new supervisor. Tenured faculty members with supervision experience are responsible for training new supervisors. Data collection on the observation rubrics continued throughout the 2011-12 academic year.