Dr. Wilson G. Bradshaw  
President, Florida Gulf Coast University

Dr. Ronald B. Toll  
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, FGCU

April 15, 2012

Dear President Bradshaw and Provost Toll,

On Friday, April 13, 2012, the FGCU Faculty Senate ratified the report and recommendations of the Senate’s Outcomes and Assessment Task Force (see Enclosures 1 and 2). With this letter, I am formally forwarding the OATF report and recommendations, as agreed in the processes adopted between Faculty Senate leadership and the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs in October (see Enclosure 2, Appendix B). This letter also provides a summary of the OATF’s origin and work, as well as the Senate’s debate of the Task Force’s report.

The OATF was established at the beginning of the 2011-12 academic year to develop and express the faculty’s position on the superordinate student learning outcomes that all academic programs are accountable to deliver and assess (see Enclosure 2, Appendix B; and Enclosure 3). Seven in-unit faculty representatives formed the core of the task force and were elected by faculty in each of the seven colleges/units. The Task Force was chaired by Dr. Judy R. Wilkerson, Professor of Research and Measurement in the College of Education, an internationally recognized expert and authority on learning outcomes and assessment in higher education and a regular consultant for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools on this topic (see Enclosure 4). Faculty members were joined on the OATF by three ex-officio representatives from Academic Affairs.

The OATF deliberated on the status of existing University Student Learning Outcomes (see Enclosure 2, Appendices C and D) and engaged the faculty at large directly in multiple ways: most notably, through an online survey in November that asked faculty to indicate their level of engagement in teaching and assessing current SLOs, and in the Spring 2012 semester, through college-/unit-level conversations led by the faculty representative to the OATF from that college/unit. (The results of the survey are summarized in Enclosure 2, Appendix D, beginning on Page 15; the unit-level conservations are summarized in faculty reports collected in Enclosure 2, Appendix F.) The Faculty Senate deliberation on the OATF’s report indicated widespread support for the level of transparency and the opportunities for faculty feedback and input built into the OATF’s work.
The OATF’s engagements with the faculty were a key set of contexts informing the resulting report by the OATF. At its core, the OATF “recommends that the University use Policy 2.005, Academic Learning Compacts, as the guiding policy and procedure for the student learning outcomes assessment component of program assessment plans at both undergraduate and graduate levels at FGCU.” The report continues:

This requires the assessment of the three areas of student learning confirmed by the faculty. The Task Force reviewed the components and descriptions in Policy 2.005 and supports the requirements as stated in policy below:

Core Student Learning Outcomes: Concise statements that describe what each active and successful graduate, who has participated in the joint teaching/learning assessment process as part of a given baccalaureate degree program, will know and be able to do (competencies). Each ALC contains jargon-free statements that describe outcomes in the following areas:

(a) Content/discipline-specific knowledge and skills,
(b) Communication skills, and
(c) Critical thinking skills.

The Faculty Senate debate on the OATF report focused primarily on this aspect of the OATF’s recommendations. The current model for University SLOs articulates learning goals in terms of specific values, abilities, or ethical qualities. The OATF model proposes superordinate outcome categories representing, as the report notes, the “three areas of student learning [that] are taught and assessed in every degree program at FGCU: communication skills, critical thinking skills, and content/discipline knowledge and skills.”

In their debate, Senators focused on the need for an approach to assessment that meets demands of accreditation without overburdening faculty involved in program review. Senators also discussed faculty concern that the OATF’s proposal would cause a loss of commitment to the student learning goals and outcomes that have been in existence since the founding of the University in curricular and extracurricular programs. In the latter regard, some faculty argued that the OATF plan was necessitated by insufficient training and support for faculty to understand and accomplish meaningful outcomes-based assessment of the current outcomes.

Several Senators spoke in favor of the OATF plan, arguing that there is no loss of our original values or ethos as an institution by acknowledging the three core areas of learning common to all FGCU students; these values and this ethos remain central parts of the University’s mission, vision, and strategic plan. This dimension of the debate focused on the OATF report’s discussion of the relationship of the original learning goals and values to the model being proposed by the task force. On this score, the report states:
Each undergraduate and graduate degree program is required to develop measurable student learning outcomes in each of the three areas, as relevant to the student learning needs of that program.

[...]

Faculty and administration are encouraged to support efforts to incorporate the student learning goals and outcomes that have been in existence since the founding of the University in curricular and extracurricular programs. The initial university student learning goals and outcomes appeared in the 1996-1997 University Catalog and have evolved over the years. Ecological sustainability, community involvement, and diversity were the most discussed SLOs and should receive special attention as programs develop their individual SLOs.

Both Senators and some members of the Task Force present in the gallery cited this dimension of the report in speaking in favor of the plan. These faculty indicated support for the OATF approach, which in this view, empowers faculty at the program level to develop curriculum and assessments that ensure the original values articulated in the current learning goals are inculcated in ways appropriate to each program.

The Senate voted 25-9 to ratify the OATF report and recommendations, as presented, without amendments.

I look forward to continuing the shared process, modeled by the OATF, of Faculty Senate and administration working together to address the future of the University’s SLOs. The OATF model presents, I believe, an opportunity for us to think innovatively about strategies to strengthen the University’s approach to assessment as proposed by the Task Force and, at the same time, to reaffirm our longstanding commitment to the values and practices present at the founding of the University.

Sincerely,

Douglas Harrison, Ph.D.
Faculty Senate President
Associate Professor of English
University Board of Trustees Member

Enclosure 1: OATF Report and Recommendations
Enclosure 2: OATF Appendices A-F
Enclosure 3: Senate President Email to Faculty, August 13, 2011
Enclosure 4: Senate President Email to Faculty, August 22, 2011