



# State University of New York

## Assessments of Academic Majors for Undergraduate Programs at Selected Campuses

Report 2008-S-131



Thomas P. DiNapoli



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# State of New York Office of the State Comptroller

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## Division of State Government Accountability

August 13, 2009

Nancy L. Zimpher, PhD  
Chancellor  
State University of New York  
State University Plaza  
Albany, New York 12246

Dear Chancellor Zimpher:

The Office of the State Comptroller is committed to helping State agencies, public authorities and local government agencies manage government resources efficiently and effectively and, by so doing, providing accountability for tax dollars spent to support government operations. The Comptroller oversees the fiscal affairs of State agencies, public authorities and local government agencies, as well as their compliance with relevant statutes and their observance of good business practices. This fiscal oversight is accomplished, in part, through our audits, which identify opportunities for improving operations. Audits can also identify strategies for reducing costs and strengthening controls that are intended to safeguard assets.

Following is a report of our audit of Assessments of Academic Majors for Undergraduate Programs at Selected Campuses. This audit was performed pursuant to the State Comptroller's authority under Article V, Section 1 of the State Constitution, and Article II, Section 8 of the State Finance Law.

This audit's results and recommendations are resources for you to use in effectively managing your operations and in meeting the expectations of taxpayers. If you have any questions about this report, please feel free to contact us.

Respectfully submitted,

*Office of the State Comptroller  
Division of State Government Accountability*





## State of New York Office of the State Comptroller

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### **Audit Objectives**

Our first audit objective was to determine if State University of New York (SUNY) campuses conducted formal assessments for their undergraduate majors as required by SUNY's Board of Trustees. Our second objective was to determine if SUNY's System Administration (System Administration) has implemented sufficient oversight to ensure that campuses are conducting the required assessments.

#### **Audit Results - Summary**

In 2000, System Administration officials issued guidelines which required the campuses to formally assess their academic undergraduate majors on a five-to-seven year cycle. During the period January 1, 2001 through December 31, 2008, a full cycle of assessments of majors should have been completed by the campuses - with exceptions for certain majors, including those that were recently established and those with low enrollments. We found that the six campuses we reviewed substantially complied with SUNY's assessment of the major requirement, with most all of the required formal assessments completed or substantially completed. However, we identified the need for some improvement in System Administration's monitoring of campus compliance with the prescribed requirements.

We judgmentally selected six campuses (the Universities at Albany and Binghamton, and the Colleges at Buffalo, Geneseo, Potsdam and Purchase) and compared the majors they offered to the majors they had assessed. For the six campuses, we identified 295 majors or program areas that should have been formally assessed. Of these, the campuses completed or substantially completed 292 assessments. SUNY officials advised us that assessments of the remaining majors or programs would be completed in 2009 or are scheduled for 2009-10 academic year.

We further noted System Administration should take actions to strengthen certain aspects of its oversight of the campuses' assessments of their undergraduate majors. For example, System Administration did not maintain and use a current master list of all of the undergraduate majors each campus offered to compare with the summaries of assessments performed and scheduled by the campuses. Without a current master list, System Administration could not adequately ensure that campuses accounted for all of their undergraduate majors in their assessment programs.

In addition, System officials stated that majors with low enrollments are not required to be assessed, and assessments of newly registered majors can be deferred until the next assessment cycle. Also, assessments of programs scheduled for accreditation review beyond the seven-year period can be deferred. However, campuses do not notify System Administration which majors will not be assessed during the seven-year cycle and the reasons why not. For the six campuses we reviewed, there were 14 majors with low enrollments and 10 new majors which were not required to be assessed. Unless the campuses notify System Administration of the majors not scheduled for assessment, System Administration cannot adequately ensure there are sufficient reasons why such majors are not assessed.

System Administration created and used a control spreadsheet to track the receipt of assessment reports and proposed schedules of planned assessments from the campuses. However, System Administration officials told us that the spreadsheet had not been kept up-to-date because of staffing issues. We also identified several errors in the spreadsheet. For example, the spreadsheet indicated that System Administration received assessment reports from Buffalo State for 11 specific programs, but the reports for these programs could not be located at System Administration.

Our audit report contains six recommendations to help improve SUNY's oversight of campuses' formal assessments of their academic majors.

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# Introduction

## Background

The State University of New York (SUNY) is the largest comprehensive system of public education in the nation, comprising 64 autonomous campuses including 29 State-operated campuses, 5 statutory colleges affiliated with private universities, and 30 community colleges. SUNY's campuses enrolled about 418,000 full-time and part-time students during 2008. Campuses are located throughout the State, and SUNY maintains a central administrative office (System Administration) in Albany.

Section 354 of the State Education Law requires SUNY to adopt a long-range Master Plan every four years. SUNY's most recent Master Plan covered the period 2004-2008 and noted that assessment of student learning is an essential factor in ensuring academic quality. Further, the Master Plan emphasized that campus-based assessment was key to making ongoing improvements and ensuring program accountability. According to SUNY officials, some SUNY academic programs had undergone formal assessments (by campus and external reviewers), and many positive changes were implemented as a result of the assessments.

In 2000, System Administration officials issued formal assessment guidelines to the campuses that directed campuses to assess their academic majors on a five-to-seven year cycle and to include a review by an external review team in the process. According to the guidelines, campuses were to start assessments of their program majors in the Fall of 2001. By June 1, 2002, campuses were required to report the results of their assessments to System Administration and to list the program majors scheduled for assessment during the next academic year. In 2006, revisions to the guidelines changed the due date of the assessment reports to September 1 each year. The guidelines did not specify System Administration's role in overseeing the assessment program. However, a report of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on Assessment Reporting (issued in May 2006) recommended that System Administration ensure that campuses conducted the assessments.

In addition to campus-performed assessments, assessments of the major can also be satisfied through accreditation reviews performed by independent, specialized entities for certain fields of study. For example, campuses can receive accreditation for programs leading to State licensure and/or certification in numerous fields (e.g., nursing, education, engineering, architecture and health). The guidelines permit campuses to use programmatic accreditation to satisfy the assessment of the major requirements. Accreditation cycles sometimes exceed seven years, but the

guidelines allow campuses to use the less frequent accreditations to meet the assessment requirement.

More than 5,000 undergraduate programs are offered at 28 of SUNY's 29 State-operated campuses and the 30 community colleges. The 28 State-operated campuses and the community colleges are required to assess their undergraduate majors. (Note: SUNY Optometry offers only graduate programs and is subject to alternative assessment requirements.) In addition to the assessment of undergraduate majors, SUNY requires campuses to perform other assessments, including assessment of student learning in general education and assessments for institutional and programmatic accreditation to ensure educational programs are effective.

**Audit  
Scope and  
Methodology**

We audited SUNY to determine if the campuses conducted formal assessments for their undergraduate majors as required by SUNY's Board of Trustees and to determine if SUNY's System Administration has implemented a sufficient oversight system to ensure that campuses are conducting the required assessments. Our audit covered the period from June 1, 2002 through December 31, 2008, which included campus assessment reporting for seven academic years ended June 30, 2008. The scope of our audit was limited to the assessment of undergraduate majors at State-operated campuses that had undergraduate programs.

To accomplish our objectives we interviewed System Administration officials and reviewed System Administration's spreadsheet used to track the submission of assessment Summary Reports. We also reviewed assessment reports on file at System Administration for six judgmentally selected campuses (the Universities at Albany and Binghamton, and the Colleges at Buffalo, Geneseo, Potsdam and Purchase), and determined whether the reports were posted to System Administration records. Our selection was based on campus size and geographic location. In addition, we developed a list of current undergraduate academic majors for the six campuses from their websites and from campus officials. We also asked campus officials which majors had an assessment or an accreditation completed since 2002. Further, we requested assessment reports from campus officials for a sample of majors that the campuses reported as assessed or accredited for which reports were not on file at System Administration.

We conducted our performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

In addition to being the State Auditor, the Comptroller performs certain other constitutionally and statutorily mandated duties as the chief fiscal officer of New York State. These include operating the State’s accounting system; preparing the State’s financial statements; and approving State contracts, refunds, and other payments. In addition, the Comptroller appoints members to certain boards, commissions and public authorities, some of whom have minority voting rights. These duties may be considered management functions for purposes of evaluating organizational independence under generally accepted government auditing standards. In our opinion, these functions do not affect our ability to conduct independent audits of program performance.

**Authority** We performed this audit pursuant to the State Comptroller’s authority as set forth in Article V, Section 1 of the State Constitution and Article II, Section 8 of the State Finance Law.

**Reporting Requirements** We provided a draft copy of this audit report to SUNY officials for their review and formal comment. We considered SUNY’s comments in preparing this report and have included them at the end of this report. SUNY officials generally agreed with our report’s recommendations and indicated the steps they have taken and will be taking to implement them.

Within 90 days of the final release of this report, as required by Section 170 of the Executive Law, the Chancellor of SUNY shall report to the Governor, the State Comptroller, and the leaders of the Legislature and fiscal committees, advising what steps were taken to implement the recommendations contained herein, and where recommendations were not implemented, the reasons why.

**Contributors to the Report** Major contributors to this report include Brian Mason, Steve Goss, Claudia Christodoulou, Taryn Davila-Webster, Constance Walker and Sue Gold.



## Audit Findings and Recommendations

### **Campus Assessment Efforts**

According to System Administration assessment guidelines, campuses should assess their academic majors on a five to seven-year cycle, with certain exceptions. Thus, campuses should have planned and completed a full seven-year cycle of assessments of their majors between the beginning of the program on January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2008. In addition, the assessment guidelines require campuses to submit to System Administration (by September 1 of each year) a summary report for the majors or programs assessed during the prior academic year, including a listing of programs scheduled for review during the next academic year.

To determine if campuses assessed their undergraduate academic majors, we judgmentally selected six campuses and reviewed a list of the undergraduate majors or programs they offered, and a list of the majors the campuses reported as assessed between June 1, 2002 and December 31, 2008. We also requested and reviewed assessment reports System Administration had on file for the six campuses as of October 7, 2008, and obtained documentation for a sample of the assessments reported as completed by the campuses that were not on file at System Administration.

We found that campuses substantially complied with the requirement to assess their undergraduate majors. For the six campuses selected, we identified 295 majors or program areas that they were required to assess. Of these, the campuses completed assessments for 278 programs, and assessments for 14 other programs were substantially completed (i.e., were awaiting external review or certification). Two other assessments were not substantially completed by the end of 2008 and were scheduled for completion by June 30, 2009. One assessment had not yet started and is scheduled for completion during the 2009-10 academic year. A summary of our results by campus is presented in the following table.

<b>Status of Campus Assessments of Undergraduate Majors As of December 31, 2008</b>					
<b>Campus</b>	<b>Number of Majors or Programs</b>				
	<b>Required to be Assessed</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Substantially Completed</b>	<b>Scheduled for Completion during 2008-09</b>	<b>To Be Performed in 2009-10</b>
Albany	41	37	3	0	1
Binghamton	29	25	2	2	0
Buffalo State	81	80	1	0	0
Geneseo	53	53	0	0	0
Potsdam	49	49	0	0	0
Purchase	42	34	8	0	0
<b>Total</b>	295	278	14	2	1

System Administration officials acknowledged that campuses should complete assessments of their majors every five to seven years per the guidelines. However, they also indicated that this requirement is not strictly enforced, so long as the campuses have sufficient reasons for needing additional time to properly complete an assessment. Moreover, officials indicated that the campuses have considerable autonomy in the development of their assessment plans, including flexibility in the time periods to complete the assessments.

We also reviewed about 260 assessments, on file at System Administration or obtained from the campuses, and we determined that these summaries addressed the major requirements prescribed by SUNY for assessment of the majors.

- Recommendation**
1. As appropriate, follow-up with the campuses to ensure that the 17 assessments, which had not been completed at the time of our audit, are fully completed and reported to System Administration timely.

**System Administration Oversight**

Although System Administration has taken certain actions to oversee the assessment program, some improvements are needed to strengthen System Administration's ability to determine if campuses have fully complied with the guidelines for all undergraduate majors that should be assessed. For example, to effectively oversee campus compliance with the assessment program, System Administration should have a master list of majors offered by the campuses. However, System Administration officials told us they did

not maintain and use a current master list of each campus' undergraduate majors to compare with the assessment reports submitted by the campuses and the majors scheduled for assessments. Without such a list, System Administration had limited assurance that campuses assessed all the majors that should have been assessed or excluded certain majors from assessment for appropriate reasons.

We also determined that the assessment guidelines System Administration issued to campuses did not specify a standard method for campuses to identify the majors included in an assessment report. As a result, it was unclear whether some assessments included individual majors or broader academic departments (e.g., some campuses have discrete Music Departments while others have music majors within a broader Performing Arts Department). Some campuses assessed majors individually (i.e., music, theater), while others performed assessments of a department that included multiple majors (i.e., performing arts). Assessments that covered departments did not always list the individual majors covered by the assessment. For example, Buffalo State informed System Administration that it planned to assess the Department of Performing Arts, but the campus only submitted an assessment for theater. Consequently, it is unclear to what extent the theater assessment satisfied the overall assessment requirement for the Department of Performing Arts, particularly with respect to the Music program at that campus.

In addition, System Administration officials stated campuses were not required to do assessments of certain majors or programs during our audit period. The majors excluded from the assessment program included those with low enrollment, new majors that would be scheduled for assessment during the next cycle, and programs scheduled for accreditation review beyond the seven-year cycle. For our six sampled campuses, we identified 14 majors that were not assessed due to low enrollment, and 10 that were not assessed because they were new majors, as summarized in the following table.

<b>New and Low Enrollment Majors by Campus as of December 31, 2008</b>		
Campus	Number of Majors	
	Low Enrollment	New Major
Albany	2	1
Binghamton	5	4
Buffalo State	0	3
Geneseo	3	0
Potsdam	3	0
Purchase	1	2
<b>Total</b>	14	10

However, the campuses did not notify System Administration which majors would not be assessed due to low enrollment or for other reasons. As a result, System Administration could not readily determine if certain majors were not assessed due to legitimate reasons or due to oversights by the campuses.

System Administration uses a control spreadsheet to track the receipt of assessment reports and proposed schedules of planned assessments from the campuses. System Administration officials told us that the control spreadsheet was not up-to-date, because campus assessment summary reports for the 2007-08 year had not yet been logged in. To determine if the spreadsheet was otherwise accurate (through the 2006-07 year), we compared the assessment reports at System Administration (as of October 7, 2008) to the information recorded on the spreadsheet for the six campuses we reviewed. We found errors in the data for four (Albany, Binghamton, Buffalo State, and Purchase) of the six campuses we tested. For example, the spreadsheet indicated that System Administration received assessment reports from Buffalo State for 11 specific programs, but the reports for these programs could not be located at System Administration. The spreadsheet also indicated that assessments for two programs had not been received from Binghamton; however, reports for these programs were on file at System Administration.

We attribute the errors to inconsistent efforts to monitor the assessments that were submitted. According to SUNY officials, the control spreadsheet was not kept up-to-date at various times between 2000 and 2008 because of

turnover and/or reductions in staff assigned to the assessment program. In addition, it is possible that some reports were submitted, but were misplaced as a result of staffing problems. Officials also told us that, currently, only about 15 percent of a professional staff position is devoted to the program, along with some clerical support.

Prior to 2006, System Administration staff reviewed the assessments and provided written feedback to the campuses on the content. However, System Administration officials told us they no longer analyze the assessments due to recommendations made in 2006 by the Provost's Advisory Task Force on Assessment Reporting and reductions in staff resources. Instead, they have sent written correspondence and emails to the campuses to acknowledge receipt of the assessment reports. We recommend, however, that System Administration consider obtaining a sample (rather than all) of the assessment reports from campuses and review them for accuracy and completeness. System Administration could update its control spreadsheet from data provided by each campus on a summary report of annual assessment activities.

In responding to our preliminary observations, System Administration officials advised us that they have been reviewing their oversight of the assessment program, particularly given the staffing limitations they have. Officials stated they are finalizing an electronic form that contains a master list of registered programs at each campus and a new procedure for using the form to obtain campus schedules for completed and planned assessments. In addition, they stated they plan to periodically request a sample of campus assessment reports for review each year.

## **Recommendations**

2. Complete implementation of plans to use a master list of all undergraduate majors to obtain data from campuses on their planned and completed assessments and the reasons why some programs might not be assessed.
3. Develop written guidance on how the master list of undergraduate programs will be used to monitor campuses' assessment of the major.
4. Complete implementation of plans to obtain a sample of assessment reports from the campuses for review and comment, if necessary, by System Administration officials.
5. Monitor the reasons why campuses exclude majors from assessment and determine if follow-up with campus officials is necessary.
6. To the extent feasible, devote sufficient resources within System Administration to monitor campus compliance with the assessment program.



# Agency Comments



THE STATE UNIVERSITY of NEW YORK

July 30, 2009

Office of the  
Vice Chancellor and  
Chief Financial Officer

University Auditor

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Mr. Brian E. Mason  
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Office of the State Comptroller  
Division of State Government Accountability  
110 State Street, 11<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Albany, New York 12236

Dear Mr. Mason:

In accordance with Section 170 of the Executive Law, we are providing our comments on the draft audit report on the State University of New York Assessments of Academic Majors for Undergraduate Programs at Selected Campuses (2008-S-131). The State University of New York (University) generally concurs with the recommendations contained in the draft report and is appreciative of the effort expended in conducting the audit. We appreciate the Office of the State Comptroller's acknowledgement that the campuses reviewed substantially complied with the requirement to assess their undergraduate majors. The data in the report show 99 percent compliance, with 292 out of 295 assessments completed or substantially completed, and 1 percent postponed, as permitted by University policy giving campuses maximum autonomy in assessment. We also appreciate the acknowledgment that the summary assessment reports reviewed by the auditors complied with the assessment requirements.

We are pleased that the audit confirmed procedural changes for assessment of majors that were under discussion during a transition in the Provost's office when the audit was first announced. System Administration has recently updated its assessment policy and procedure. We now require each campus with undergraduate programs to submit a schedule of completed and planned assessment of every undergraduate major on a master list of all University undergraduate majors. The first schedules are due from campuses on September 1, 2009.

As part of the schedule, campuses are required to explain the reason why any major was not assessed on a regular cycle, or is not scheduled for assessment in the future. In addition, campuses are no longer required to submit a Summary Report for each completed assessment of the major. Instead, campuses are required to maintain copies of their Summary Reports, which may be requested as part of a periodic audit. Consistent with the Board's Re-engineering SUNY initiative, this procedural change

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• NYS College of Agriculture/Life Sciences at Cornell University • NYS College of Human Ecology at Cornell University • NYS College of Industrial/Labor Relations at Cornell Univ  
NYS College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University UNIVERSITY COLLEGES SUNY Brockport • Buffalo State College • SUNY Cortland • Empire State College • SUNY Fr  
• SUNY Geneseo • SUNY New Paltz • SUNY Old Westbury • College at Oneonta • SUNY Oswego • SUNY Plattsburgh • SUNY Potsdam • Purchase College • TECHNOLOGY COLL  
Alfred State College • SUNY Canton • SUNY Cobleskill • SUNY Delhi • Farmingdale State College • Maritime College • Morrisville State College • SUNY Institute of Tech  
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streamlines efforts for both campuses and System Administration while upholding the Board policy on assessment of majors.

We wish to clarify that System Administration does maintain a master list of all academic programs offered by University campuses, but that the list had not been formatted for use in tracking assessment information at the time of the audit. As part of a transition that began prior to the audit being announced, the University's master list has now been formatted for use in the administration of the University's assessment of the major program.

We would also like to provide additional information about Buffalo State's assessment of "Performing Arts" in response to the findings on page 15 of the report. The College underwent a re-organization that split the Performing Arts Department into two departments: Theater and Music. Then, these programs both successfully achieved accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Theater (NAST) and the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), which satisfied the University's assessment requirement. While these types of structural changes on campuses make recordkeeping over time somewhat of a challenge, they are perfectly acceptable and within the discretion of University campuses. Our new system for reporting assessment schedules for individual, registered programs should reduce recordkeeping challenges.

#### **OSC Recommendations and the University's Response**

**Recommendation 1:** As appropriate, follow-up with the campuses to ensure that the 17 assessments, which had not been completed at the time of our audit, are fully completed and reported to System Administration.

**University Response:** Implemented. The Provost's Office has followed up with the campuses to ensure the assessments are completed, but, consistent with new procedures, is no longer requiring Summary Reports to be submitted. Starting in September 2009, the schedule of completed and planned assessments submitted by campuses will enable System Administration to keep track of the completed and planned assessments of all majors on all campuses over time.

**Recommendation 2:** Complete implementation of plans to use a master list of all undergraduate majors to obtain data from campuses on their planned and completed assessments and the reasons why some programs might not be assessed.

**University Response:** Implemented. The University used its master list of all undergraduate majors to design a computerized form on which campuses are required to report planned and completed assessments and the reasons why some programs might not have been assessed, or are not scheduled for a future assessment.

**Recommendation 3:** Develop written guidance on how the master list of undergraduate programs will be used to monitor campuses' assessment of the major.

**University Response:** Implemented. The University's online policy and procedure guide for assessment of majors was updated. The policy and procedure guide addresses program review and assessment, external review, reporting, and maintenance of records. In addition, the University prepared internal guidance for the use of assessment schedules submitted by campuses.

**Recommendation 4:** Complete implementation of plans to obtain a sample of assessment reports from the campuses for review and comment, if necessary, by System Administration officials.

**University Response:** The Office of the Provost and the Office of the University Auditor will complete and implement plans for audit protocols and the use of assessment schedules submitted by campuses to select a sample of campuses and majors for jointly conducted, periodic audits.

**Recommendation 5:** Monitor the reasons why campuses exclude majors from assessment and determine if follow-up with campus officials is necessary.

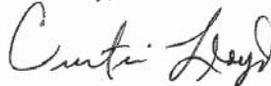
**University Response:** System Administration will assess the information provided by the campuses to determine which majors were not assessed, or not scheduled for future assessment, and the reasons for not assessing the majors. As needed, System Administration will follow-up with campuses.

**Recommendation 6:** To the extent feasible, devote sufficient resources within System Administration to monitor campus compliance with the assessment program.

**University Response:** The University is committed to maintaining campus compliance with the assessment program. The University's Provost has convened a Provost's Advisory Group on the SUNY Assessment Initiative that will meet in summer 2009 to review current policies and procedures, including the role of System Administration in assessment, and make recommendations for additional streamlining.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on your report. Please contact me if you have any questions or need clarification.

Sincerely,



Curtis Lloyd  
Associate Vice Chancellor  
for Finance and Administration

Copy: Chancellor Zimpher  
Provost Palm  
Vice Chancellor Wood