The Springboard staff prepared a self-study following program review guidelines. An external review team visited the campus, reviewed the self-study documents, interviewed unit personnel and university administrators, and submitted an external report. The Vice Provost for Academic Programs read the self-study and the external review. This document summarizes those materials and presents a synthesis and a set of summary findings and recommendations.

SUMMARY OF THE SELF-STUDY

Introduction

The Springboard course, currently offered as UNIV 111, is a graded, one-credit hour course that develops written and oral communication skills; analysis and problem solving; judgment; leadership; and self-assurance. Multiple sections of the course are offered each semester–33 in fall and 10 in spring.

The program’s permanent employees include only a director and a secretary. Six full-time equivalent graduate students are employed as instructors. A large number of students, staff, faculty and community members work as coaches in the Springboard classes.

The Springboard program was initiated in 1996, and has been able to demonstrate a positive effect on student retention and satisfaction.

Mission

The Springboard course emphasizes the university learning outcomes; it encourages students to be “able to do what they know.” Springboard contributes directly to the mission of the University through the university learning outcomes and through its positive impact on student retention.
Description of the Unit

The curriculum is based on a “a series of hands-on, individual and small group activities (some recoded on videotape)” designed to assess the students’ strengths and developmental needs. The activities include interviews, group discussions, analysis and problem-solving exercises, extemporaneous speaking, reflection, and self-assessment.

The current budget for Springboard includes $33,000 for operating and $80,000 for personnel. The program occupies a small suite of offices, classrooms, video and computer rooms, video-viewing rooms, and a coach-training room in University Hall.

In calendar year 2002, Springboard courses served 419 first-year students. In addition, the program enrolled upperclassmen (351) and graduate students (27) in courses for Springboard Coaches. Fourteen students enrolled in a second-semester course, Upper Springboard.

Learning outcomes of students in the Springboard class are assessed each week through written responses to open-ended questions about that week’s exercise. Also, numerical responses (Likert scale) are gathered for each exercise. Finally, feedback from instructors is obtained in weekly informal focus groups.

Self-assessment

Quality. The in-house study conducted by Institutional Research showed that Springboard had a measurable impact on fall-to-fall retention, compared to first-year students who were not involved in any first-year program. Although the size of the effect varied from less than one percent to a high of six percent, the effect was always positive, and was achieved with far less student contact (1 credit hour) or expenditure than most comparison first-year programs. In parallel, the National Study of Student Engagement showed gains for Springboard students in the degree to which they were involved across campus and the degree to which they believed the Springboard class helped them speak clearly and effectively; analyze problems; work with others; understand other racial and ethnic backgrounds; promoted contact among students from different economic and social background; and helped students cope with non-academic responsibilities.

Relationship and relevance of mission. Springboard’s mission and activities are informed by national studies of retention. Active learning, meaningful student-faculty and student-student contact, and personal contact outside the classroom have all been recommended to improve retention and student success. All these elements have been purposefully incorporated in the design of Springboard.

Demand. Springboard distinguishes itself from UNIV 100 in that Springboard “focuses upon the development of skills internal to the student.” This focus helps to empower students and promote self-assurance.
An unexpected outcome is that the coaching experience “is at least as valuable as the first-year students’ experience.” Upperclassmen-as-coaches learn the essential skills of mentoring while they also reflect on their own experiences as freshmen.

**Areas of distinction.** The one-on-one mentoring component of Springboard is its most distinctive feature. The program is unusual in its emphasis on self-awareness and reflection. However, the program also emphasizes the academic skills and abilities described by the university learning outcomes.

Springboard is prepared to be one of the initial users of the electronic portfolio, which is also designed to emphasize (or accommodate) the university learning outcomes. The use of the electronic portfolio will allow Springboard to scale up and serve more students. It will also help further the goal of guiding students to self-empowerment and active learning.

**Collaboration.** Springboard has a variety of groups and programs with which it collaborates and interacts. These include the Springboard Research Group, International Programs, Latino Student Union, Black Student Union, Vision, Athletics, the Cooperative Education and Internship Program, and the President’s Leadership Academy.

**Financial Resources.** A variety of belt-tightening exercises have been implemented, including discontinuation of a student “Team,” reduction in office supply expenses, and reduction in the communications portion of the budget. On the other hand, equipment is identified as the area of the budget in greatest need. For instance, the program needs several new cameras; it anticipates a switch to digital equipment; and computers need to be upgraded. An analysis by Institutional Research indicates that the Springboard program has a favorable income to expense ratio.

**Planning**

The self-study document offers six major goals around which planning is organized.

*Serve more students.* Given a recent renovation resulting in more classroom space, Springboard has a capacity to reach more students. The program currently serves 9% of the incoming class. A staged plan for growth is presented, relying on additional computer and video equipment, additional GAs, and some additional office space. With the addition of these resources, the program could reach 18% of the incoming class.

*Publish research on Springboard’s success.* The Springboard Research Group, mentioned above, is spearheaded by faculty in Industrial-Organizational Psychology. The research to be carried out will provide an excellent data base on which to base new developments in the program.

*Improve the Springboard book.* A great deal was learned from the first time the book was published, last year.
Raise the caliber of Springboard Coaches. The GPA requirement for coaches has been established at 2.5, with the expectation that coaches who are more academically successful will also be more successful in mentoring first-year students.

Improve coach recruitment/Ad campaign. The plan is to move up the timeframe for recruiting coaches, to avoid lowering standards in a last-minute effort to fill all the coaching slots.

Hire top-notch graduate-assistant instructors. Until now, graduate assistants have come largely from a single department. The plan calls for recruiting from a wider variety of departments.

The Springboard Director has negotiated to accomplish classroom renovations at a relatively small cost. She has also had some success in negotiating for an additional graduate assistant, but will require some additional support for graduate assistant support. The renovations and addition of some new equipment was made possible by efficient use of money in other parts of the Springboard budget.

SUMMARY OF THE EXTERNAL REPORT

Janet Barnes-Farrell (University of Connecticut) and Cindy McCauley (Center for Creative Leadership) comprised the external review team. They reviewed the self-study and other materials describing the Springboard program prior to their campus visit, which occurred October 19-21, 2003. During their visit they met with Springboard staff, instructors, coaches, and students as well as a variety of administrators. They submitted the external report on October 30, 2003.

Strengths and weaknesses

Program content and design. The external report evaluates the methods and values used by Springboard as constituting “best-practice in learning design.” In this regard, they cite opportunities for practice coupled with developmental feedback, experiential exercises, and one-on-one coaching, among other things. They comment: “These learning methods are a strength of the program and differentiate it from other freshman programs. We think that there are few, if any, programs for freshmen at other universities with so many elements of a learner-centric approach” [emphasis added].

Another strength cited by the reviewers is the use of the university learning outcomes for Springboard students. In contrast, the reviewers recommended that more explicit learning outcomes for coaches are needed.

The reviewers heard comments that Springboard is perceived to be “too easy.” The external report disagrees, stating that “basing grades on participation and effort is appropriate for the learning goals of the program,” goals they noted previously to be a strength. Additionally,
the reviewers distinguished between a course being academically difficult—which Springboard is not—and a course such as Springboard that is personally challenging to most students. Furthermore, the external reviewers noted that the current director has improved and documented the curriculum.

The major “lingering question” remaining to the reviewers was the purpose of the program and how the program should be positioned to best accomplish that purpose. They perceived a tension between a purpose of providing a first step in developing the university learning outcomes, and a purpose of socializing freshmen. They recommend “…that key administrators work with the program director to clarify the mandate for the program: is it primarily a retention initiative, a learning outcomes initiative, or some sort of balance between the two?”

**Evaluation practices.** The external reviewers find the large amount of program self-evaluation data that have been collected and used to be a strength of the program. They note that most of these data reflect positively on Springboard, and that the director has used the data to make improvements in the program.

In noting that Springboard has documented a positive 3-4% impact on retention rates, the reviewers also comment that “a more shared understanding of the desired impact o retention rates would be helpful.” Even more useful, however, would be more data on student achievement of the learning outcomes Springboard was designed to impact! The new partnership with the research group in Psychology may contribute to meeting this need.

**Permanent staff.** The reviewers find the staff to be “very lean.” They commended the current director for her work and for the tone of continuous self-improvement she sets for the program. Improvements in the curriculum and the use of evaluation data to make programmatic improvements were also noted very positively. They note, however, that the director’s job requires significant management responsibilities, in addition to curriculum and teaching. The reviewers recommend that consideration be given to hiring an assistant director, should further growth in Springboard be desired.

**Instructors.** The external reviewers identify “utilizing instructors as coaches that freshmen saw as similar to themselves” as a positive theme emerging from their review. They recommend for continued reliance on graduate students as instructors in the program, but for also providing additional development opportunities for the graduate student instructors. Specifically, they recommended that the director provide for “(1) an opportunity for new instructors to become more thoroughly oriented to the goals of Springboard and the process by which those goals are achieved; (2) more time devoted to staff discussion of the structure and function of upcoming exercises and how they related to the ‘big picture.’”

**Coaches.** The reviewers identify the recruitment of “competent and highly motivated coaches’ as an important goal for the program. They offer two strategies to achieve this goal. First, develop partnerships with academic units whose educational goals are aligned with the benefits of the coaching experience. Second, create development opportunities for coaches.
Evaluation of the Unit’s Plans

Serve more students. Although the external reviewers support this goal, they also recommend more discussion between administration and the director to make sure Springboard is positioned correctly to serve purposes most valued by the University.

Publish research on Springboard’s success. This is an appropriate and positive goal, one that will also enhance the program’s reputation.

Improve the Springboard book. The reviewers find this goal too narrow, and should be expanded to include continual improvement of the content of the program.

Raise the caliber of Springboard coaches. The reviewers comment that additional screening of coaches may be necessary to achieve this important goal.

Improve coach recruitment/Ad campaign. This goal should have a high priority. The emphasis should be on targeted recruitment combined with articulated standards for coaches.

Hire top-notch graduate-assistant instructors. The development of partnerships with one or two appropriate academic programs may contribute significantly to achievement of this goal.

Resources Required by the Unit: Recommendations

The external reviewers identified three categories of resources important to the success of Springboard.

Equipment and physical facilities. The nature of the program requires equipment, primarily computers and video equipment. There is a serious need to update the equipment. The reviewers also note an opportunity here to promote the use of the electronic portfolio for assessment. Classroom, coaching, and computer-room space is the other obvious need in this category.

Human resources: staff. The reviewers believe that an assistant director and additional instructors are necessary to meet the goals for program growth stated in the self-study.

Human resources: staff development. The reviewers recommend that resources devoted to staff development would be a wise investment.

Summary
The external reviewers find Springboard to be a “unique educational program,” and that it has several noteworthy design strengths, as noted earlier in their report. They close by emphasizing their recommendation to focus any additional resources on “equipment and facility enhancements and increased time for staff and coach development.”

Program Review Findings

The Springboard program is innovative and contemporary in its design and effective in its implementation. The program’s “learner-centric approach” is informed by and makes creative use of recent findings regarding effective teaching and learning strategies. The program brings distinctiveness and recognition to the University for its development of an academic program guided in design and purpose by studies on teaching, learning, and assessment.

The outcomes of this excellent design are directly reflected in student outcomes. Although greater attention should be given to students’ achievement of the specific learning outcomes addressed in Springboard, it is nonetheless clear that Springboard contributes to students’ understanding of their own accomplishments and gives them the tools to improve their skills. Students’ increased confidence in themselves is one result. Measurably higher retention rates of Springboard students is another. Although the impact on retention rates may appear small at first glance, it is noteworthy that the 2-4 percent increase in retention rates was the result of a single one-hour course. Given the further consideration that much of the instruction (e.g., coaching) in Springboard is provided at low or no cost, Springboard’s impact on student success may set an impact-per-dollar success standard few other programs at the University could achieve.

Some of Springboard’s success is surely due to the fact that the program uses the same approach to self-assessment and subsequent improvement for the program as a whole that it uses as the standard for its individual students. The result has been the continual modification and improvement in the program’s structure and activities. This effective approach to self-study and improvement also carries forward to the goals and plans detailed in the self-study.

Findings Requiring Action

1. Mission statement. The external reviewers’ comment about clarifying the mandate for the program is revealing. The program’s future direction is obviously dependent on having an agreed upon mission statement. The mission statement will impact the ways in which the program is evaluated. It seems clear that the program is both a retention initiative and a learning outcomes initiative, but is there a common understanding of how big an impact on retention Springboard should be expected to have to be judged successful? Similarly, is there a common understanding of how (or if) the advancement of specific learning outcomes through Springboard is connected to General Education, BGX, or to other
aspects of the students’ learning experience? Will the advances students make in Springboard be consolidated and built upon in subsequent courses?

Another function served by Springboard is as an incubator and proving ground for other initiatives. The most obvious example here is the role Springboard intends to play in piloting electronic portfolios. It is true more generally that Springboard provides opportunities to move ahead with assessment initiatives at the University.

2. Assessment of student achievement. The external report calls for “… additional data on the impact of Springboard participation on the outcomes it was designed to impact: the learning outcomes, student self-confidence, and student socialization and connection with the university.” The report acknowledges that qualitative data of this sort is collected at each class, but suggests that more needs to be done.

In attempting to figure out how to assess student gains in skill development, it might be valuable to revisit the learning outcomes for Springboard. There are obvious advantages to using the university learning outcomes as the outcomes for Springboard, but there are disadvantages, too. Principle among these might be that they are difficult to assess because they are so general. It might be the case that an assessment strategy would be easier to develop if the learning outcomes were more specific.

3. Coaches. Coaches play a critical role in Springboard. Several things might be done to improve the quality of the coaches, and thereby their effectiveness with students.

One of the unexpected benefits of Springboard is the positive effect it has on coaches. This is especially significant given that many coaches are students at the University. Having realized this, the program could be more intentional in promoting a positive learning experiences for coaches by creating learning outcomes for coaches.

The recruitment of qualified individuals as coaches is a critical step. The external reviewers have provided several ideas, and the director has several good ideas on this topic as well. These include establishing a minimum grade point average for coaches, and recruiting coaches from specific departments whose academic purposes are well aligned with the training and experience provided by Springboard. There are also possibilities for providing additional developmental opportunities for coaches.

4. Instructors. Springboard is already recruiting instructors (graduate assistants) from specific departments. Issues of instructor training are also important, particularly given the vital role they play in the program.

5. Size of the program. A key issue in the self-study is the plan for an increase in the number of students served. It is a careful, staged plan to increase the number of students to the capacity that can be served by newly renovated spaces. However, resources will be needed to accomplish this growth, principally additional graduate assistants, computers, and video equipment. To be fair, there are significant needs for computers and video equipment
currently, and even if the program does not grow at all. The director apparently feels that the external reviewers overestimated the resources needed to accomplish the growth plans as described in the self-study.

Resource issues should not be the only consideration in planning the size of Springboard in the future. We need to establish an optimal size for Springboard in terms of its academic purposes. Determining the optimal size will require study. We need to know, for instance, if there are certain populations of students who benefit most from the Springboard experience. We also need to integrate the consideration of optimal size with any refinements in mission that are forthcoming. For instance, if Springboard connects directly to General Education, BGX, or to other aspects of the students’ learning experience, then those connections will contribute to the demand for Springboard. Similarly, if the advances students make in Springboard come to be valued by other programs, then Springboard might become a prerequisite or requirement for other majors, which would also influence demand. Currently, we have little of this sort of information, and so are forced to think about the size of Springboard in more abstract ways.

**PROGRAM REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Mission statement.** The director should begin discussions about a mission statement for Springboard with the vice provost for academic services. These discussions should include understandings about the program’s expected impact on retention, among other things. The developing mission statement should be shared with and eventually endorsed by the provost. The statement should be completed early in the fall semester 2004.

2. **Assessment of student achievement.** The director should lead the effort to further develop specific assessments for student self-confidence, student socialization, and connection with the university. In addition, assessments for skill development associated with the university learning outcomes—or more specific learning outcomes related to them—should be developed. Although pilot implementation might occur earlier, these additional assessment efforts should be ready for use by fall 2005.

3. **Coaches.** A plan to recruit and enroll qualified coaches should be initiated immediately. Additional development opportunities for coaches, perhaps based on specific learning outcomes for coaches, should be developed and refined over the course of the next two to three years.

4. **Instructors.** Efforts to recruit qualified graduate student instructors from specific academic programs should be continued. In addition, additional opportunities for training of instructors should be developed and implemented as soon as feasible.

5. **Size of the program.** A good deal of study needs to be conducted to gather information relevant to the optimal size of the program. Armed with this evidence, the director and the vice provost for academic services should present a plan for growth to a
stated optimal size to the provost, for his consideration and approval, by the end of spring semester 2005.

*Springboard should report annually to the Vice Provost for Academic Services, with a copy to the Provost, on the implementation of these recommendations.*