Report shows Auburn students making rapid progress in learning

Recent results from a pioneering study involving more than two dozen colleges and universities across the nation show significant gains in the intellectual and academic skills of Auburn University students as they progress from freshmen to seniors.

The findings were presented on Feb. 5 to the Auburn Board of Trustees, which has supported the university’s involvement in the program for data-based measurement of student learning since the program began in 2005.

The university’s chief academic officer, Provost Mary Ellen Mazey, says results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or CLA, provide evidence that at Auburn, students are developing at a rapid pace certain key skills expected of a college graduate. Until recently, that was a claim that all colleges and universities made but few could document.

“The CLA provides a strong accountability component to education,” Mazey said. “Auburn was one of the first institutions nationally to participate, and results will allow us to continually monitor and improve our student outcomes and success.”

Drew Clark, Auburn’s director of institutional research and assessment, said the assessment addresses a matter that is at the heart of higher education. “The question that the CLA seeks to answer is: Can we demonstrate that students are getting smarter during their time in college? Everyone assumes that is the case, but how do they know?”

Funded by the nonprofit Lumina Foundation, the assessment program seeks to help participating colleges and universities answer those questions. The CLA study was designed to help universities improve instruction and curricula by evaluating overall student performance over four years and developing programs and initiatives to correct deficiencies and build on strengths.

To track comprehensive student progress, the CLA uses a scoring system comparable to the SAT college entrance exam. Students in a scientifically selected sample take their first series of CLA tests in their freshman year, and their average as a group forms a basis for future comparisons. They take a comparable CLA test in their sophomore year and again in their senior year to measure their educational progress.

Using standardized computer-based procedures, the CLA presents students with complex materials involving realistic problems. Over three hours, students must complete two tasks that require them to read, analyze, evaluate and apply information from those materials to develop potential solutions to these problems.

The latest testing results show that Auburn students showed significant academic improvement and significantly exceeded average scores on both CLA tasks. Those tasks provide a composite measure of students’ ability to perform a complex task, analytic-writing ability, ability to make an analytical argument and ability to logically critique an argument.

Clark said a notable find of the CLA was that Auburn students are making especially strong gains in analytic writing between their freshman and senior years. Explaining that analytic writing measures far more than literary skills, he added, “This section of the test measures learning gains in both written communication and critical thinking.”

Auburn began developing a writing initiative three years ago and added the Miller

Viewing MRI
Auburn University President Jay Gogue shows Gov. Bob Riley, foreground, an artist’s rendering of the MRI Research Center under construction in Auburn’s new research park. The center is only the second in the Southeast to feature the new generation MRI technology. Riley was on campus Feb. 4 for the MRI Research Center’s groundbreaking ceremony.

Work starts on next-generation MRI Research Center in park

Gov. Bob Riley joined university leaders, local officials and business executives on Feb. 4 to celebrate the groundbreaking for a new $21 million facility that will house the Auburn University Magnetic Resonance Imaging Research Center at Auburn Research Park.

Construction of the 45,000-square-foot facility began in January with a projected completion date in September. It is the second building in the research park. The architect for the project is Perkins+Will, and the construction manager is Brasfield & Gorrie LLC.

Magnetic resonance imaging uses a magnetic field and radio waves to create detailed images of organs, tissues and the skeletal system. The heart of the MRI machine is a large magnet whose strength is measured in Tesla, or T, and named for electrical engineer and inventor Nikola Tesla.

Auburn signed the master research agreement with Siemens last year. University President Jay Gogue said that agreement will advance Auburn University to the forefront of biomedical engineering and has the potential to bring lifesaving technologies to the citizens of Alabama and the region.

Examples of current and potential areas of MRI-related research include brain function, metabolic imaging and pharmaceuticals, as well as research into diabetes and heart disease.

“The MRI Research Center is a prime example of how state funds can be invested and state educational institutions collaborate with the private sector to bring the best and brightest researchers to Alabama.”
New Learning Commons in Draughon Library offers full-service study area

Members of the Auburn University Board of Trustees joined administrators, faculty, staff and students in the dedication of the new Learning Commons in Draughon Library.

Throughout the past three years, University Libraries faculty and staff have worked closely with Auburn’s students to plan and develop the Learning Commons, which features 300 additional power outlets, 10 group study rooms and almost 500 new seats.

Library personnel worked with faculty and staff in the Miller Writing Center, the Office of Information Technology and Study Partners to create an area of the library that would provide academic and technologic assistance in one location with convenient access to Draughon Library’s reference services.

“We are meeting the needs of today’s library users with our new state-of-the-art Learning Commons,” said Dean of Libraries Bonnie MacEwan. “The reconfigured space provides a productive, dynamic and comfortable learning environment.”

On the program for the dedication were Dean of Libraries Bonnie MacEwan; Provost Mary Ellen Mazey; Auburn University President Jay Gogue; Libraries Student Advisory Council member, Katie Wilson; and Sarah Newton, president pro tem of Auburn’s Board of Trustees.

— Brittany Cosby

Measuring learning

continued from page 1

Writing Center last year after findings from its first CLA testing – administered when today’s seniors were freshmen – showed that many students were arriving on campus inadequately prepared for college-level writing. Three years later, the CLA tests of these students as seniors showed that they had not only acquired these skills during their time at Auburn but were now performing well above expectation.

“Auburn students are gaining a learning dividend,” said Sarah Newton, president pro tem of the Auburn Board of Trustees. “It’s a credit to members of the Auburn faculty and President Jay Gogue’s leadership in enriching the Auburn academic experience.”

The increased emphasis on analytical writing will help Auburn strengthen students’ capabilities even more in the future, Clark said. “The university’s comprehensive writing initiative is likely to continue to improve these gains over time.”

Although Auburn uses the results primarily for self-evaluation, the results also place the university in the top third of the 26 institutions that completed all phases of the four-year study. Ohio State University, Syracuse University, George Washington University and Loyola University of Chicago were among the other research institutions participating in the learning assessment.

Clark said the CLA results confirm that students are making measurable progress at all participating institutions, with students gaining an average of 100 points on an SAT-equivalent scale from their college education. “All made gains, which is great news for anyone concerned about the value of higher education,” he said. “Attending college pays a dividend far beyond the earnings dividend.”

— Roy Summerford

Campus Calendar

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16

PROVOST’S FORUM “Scholarship of Public Engagement,” Provost Mary Ellen Mazey and members of the faculty, 3 p.m., 2225 Student Center

AMERICAN MASTERS LECTURE Charles Smith, pottery artist whose work was included in the traveling exhibit “Uncommon Beauty in Common Objects,” 4 p.m., Jule Collins Smith Museum; part of JCS Museum series “Tradition/Innovation: American Masterpieces of Southern Craft and Traditional Art”

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17

STUDY ABROAD FAIR Exhibits, photos and information about faculty-led programs and other opportunities for students to study in other countries, and about how faculty can lead programs abroad, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., lobby, Haley Center

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19


UNIVERSITY THEATRE “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee,” musical comedy about quirky contestants and equally odd judges in an old-fashioned spelling bee, 7:30 p.m., Telfair Peet Theatre; also at 7:30 p.m., Feb. 20 and Feb. 23-27, and 2:30 p.m., Feb. 21; see http://medi.acl.auburn.edu/theatre/

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26

NEXT Auburn Report


Museum exhibit looks at lost legacy of architectural icon Paul Rudolph

An exhibition at the Jule Collins Museum of Fine Art examines the vagaries of popular taste as they affect the legacy of Paul Rudolph, a 1940 Auburn graduate who was an international icon of architecture in the latter half of the 20th century.

On display through April 17, the new exhibition of photographs by Chris Mottalini, “After You Left, They Took It Apart: Demolished Paul Rudolph Homes,” records the demise of three abandoned houses designed by the world-renowned architect.

Rudolph was dean of the School of Architecture at Yale University during the 1960s. Best known for his starkly geometric, concrete building design termed “Brutalism,” his residential works shared the same modernist aesthetic while reflecting regional and vernacular influences.
Auburn will institute the Common Book program, “Auburn Connects!” this fall with the reading of “Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace…One School at a Time” by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. Provost Mary Ellen Mazey said the Common Book program, which is used in more than 100 universities across the country, was developed to promote a shared academic experience among students — particularly, incoming freshmen.

“The goal of incorporating a Common Book is to enhance our campus community by fostering dialogue and incorporating shared knowledge into students’ classroom experiences,” Mazey said. “Students will have the opportunity to discuss and write about the many themes explored in the book such as diversity, education and overcoming adversity, while sharing their social, political and personal views.”

Constance Relihan, chair of the Common Book committee, added, “We are focusing on doing projects to increase students’ intellectual connection to each other and to the university very early on, ideally in their first semester,” said Relihan, who is senior associate dean for academic affairs in the College of Liberal Arts.

Mazey asked the committee to recommend three books from which she could make a final choice. The selection committee based its recommendations on six goals: to promote intellectual community on campus; to help students gain a global perspective; to promote a culture of service; to emphasize individual empowerment, responsibility and the need for hard work; to help set the stage for intellectual engagement; and to be able to be linked to several types of programming on campus during the academic year.

“‘Three Cups of Tea’ meets all the criteria,” Relihan said. “It is one man figuring out what he wants to do and really working to achieve that. It also creates awareness about a part of our world that the students need to know more about, and emphasizes how you work with another culture. Additionally, it is most certainly about service to other people.”

Mortenson is the founder of the Central Asia Institute, which is dedicated to promoting peace through the creation of schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The book tells the tale of how he found his passion for his work and his struggles to get his first school built.

A large number of freshman classes will integrate the book into course work and class discussions, and all Learning Community sections will use the book in courses designated as UNIV. Also, the university and various departments will sponsor public lectures, small group discussions, film series and service-learning projects based on the themes and cultural references in the book. Relihan said the committee hopes to bring Mortenson to campus in October.

The committee chair said the panel would like to see everyone, not just incoming freshmen, participate in the program at some level. “Yes, our primary target is freshmen, but there will be a lot going on publicly,” she said. So, why not use the text in upper division classes too so that all students can take advantage of the resources the university is providing?”

Relihan said that a new book will be chosen each year, with the plan to bring to campus the author or someone who is connected to each book. For information online about the “Auburn Connects!” Common Book program, see www.auburn.edu/auburnconnects.

— Carol Nelson

A faculty development workshop has been scheduled for Thursday, Feb. 18, from 9 a.m.-11:30 a.m. in the Student Center, room 2218, for faculty who are interested in learning how to participate in “Auburn Connects!” the university’s new common book program. For more information, or to reserve a space for the workshop, contact Lee Anne Caudle at lwc0003@auburn.edu.

Melissa Humble, Photographic Services

Military honors
The U.S. Department of Defense has bestowed its Seven Seals Award on The Hotel at Auburn University for its support of the National Guard and Armed Forces Reserve. Dillard Hammett, left, of the Alabama Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve presented Hans van der Reijden, managing director of the university facility, with the Seven Seals Award, which recognizes the hotel for employing National Guard and Reserve service members from all branches of the military and consistently supporting them with regard to drills, summer camps and active duty calls.

Advanced MRI

to develop a world-class research center to advance science and technology, improving quality of life in the global community and promoting economic development for the state of Alabama,” said Dean of Engineering Larry Benefield.

“This effort supports Alabama’s goal of becoming known as a key state in advancing the biomedical frontier,” said Charles McCrary of the university’s Board of Trustees.

The first floor of the new building will house a Siemens Verio open-bore 3T MRI scanner that will be used for both clinical and research use, as well as the nation’s first actively shielded whole-body 7T MRI.

There are only 28 7T scanners worldwide. Auburn’s 7T will be one of two located in the southeastern U.S. and will be the only actively shielded unit in the U.S. This unit will be used solely for research. Thomas Denney, a professor of electrical and computer engineering at Auburn, has been named director of the new research center.

East Alabama Medical Center will lease approximately 3,000 square feet, including the 3T scanner for a clinical imaging operation. This floor will also house offices and waiting rooms, as well as a research laboratory.

The second floor of the building will contain a coil laboratory, office space for faculty and staff associated with the MRI Research Center and a distance-learning-enabled classroom for MRI training. It will also house office space for The Orthopedic Clinic, as well as the U.S. Army Aeromedical Research Lab, or USAARL, which will collaborate with Auburn on research on head and spinal injuries.

Third-floor tenants will include EAMC Rehab Works, Auburn’s Department of Kinesiology as well as the offices of medical specialists.

— Cheryl Cobb
Facility to meet in special session to consider change in terms of office

The Executive Committee of the University Senate is calling a Special Meeting of the University Faculty on Tuesday, Feb. 16, at 3 p.m. in Broun Hall Auditorium. The purpose of this meeting is to vote on a resolution changing the start date of Faculty Officer terms from mid-March to July 1, effective immediately, and to enable faculty to discuss and comment on proposed policy changes associated with promotion and tenure, conflict of interest and proposed changes to several other Faculty Handbook policies.

The agenda for the meeting is available online at http://www.auburn.edu/administration/governance/senate/website/agendas/2009-2010/specFac_agenda_02_16_10.html.

Several campus offices make recent moves to formerly vacant Foy Hall

Following several moves in December and January, several offices are now in formerly vacant Foy Hall: International Education/Study Abroad, second floor; Distance Learning, first floor; Affirmative Action and EEOC, third floor; Freshman Year Experience, first floor; Office of Diversity, third floor; Human Resources, third floor; Graduate School and the Insurance Office for international students, Foy 029; War Eagle Food Court, first floor of west wing; Photographic Services; adjacent to Food Court.

Board approves Vet Med’s preliminary plans for new small-animal hospital

The College of Veterinary Medicine has moved a step closer to its goal of building a new small-animal teaching hospital alongside the large-animal teaching hospital that opened in 2003. The Auburn Board of Trustees on Feb. 5 approved the schematic design and site plan for a 158,000-square-foot facility that would be built between the Vaughan Large Animal Hospital and Overton Auditorium. The work would include demolition of McAdory Hall and renovation of other buildings used in care of small animals and teaching of veterinary students in that field. The board’s action enables the college to proceed with the design phase, with a final decision on construction contingent upon the availability of funding for the $70 million hospital through private gifts and a future bond issue.

Veterinary Dean Timothy Boosinger told the board that a new teaching hospital devoted to small-animal care and teaching in that specialty would enable the college to increase enrollment at a time of high demand for veterinary education. At present, there are three qualified applicants for every slot for Alabama residents, and out-of-state students face odds of 45:1 for each available slot.

The board also approved preliminary plans for a $7.5 million expansion of the university’s Facilities Complex to pull scattered maintenance units into the complex and build a larger warehouse facility.

Committee appointed to seek new dean for Forestry and Wildlife Sciences

The Office of the Provost has announced the appointment of a 10-member search committee to seek a successor for Richard Brinker as head of the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences. Brinker will retire at the end of 2010, after 23 years on the school’s faculty, the last 12 as dean.

Veterinary Medicine Dean Timothy Boosinger will head the committee, which includes representatives from Forestry and Wildlife Sciences faculty, students and staff, as well as Cooperative Extension, faculty governance and the Alabama Forestry Association.