Campus Policies: Assessment of Student Learning

The following items are drawn from a discussion thread on the POD (Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education) listserv during August 2010.

You can access the archives of this listserv to see the original postings or the entire thread, or you can subscribe to this listserv, at

https://listserv.nd.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A0=POD

Example Definition of Assessment of Student Learning:

Assessment of student learning is a reflective, ongoing, formative process for the purpose of improving student learning success. It involves: (1) creating and refining appropriate criteria and standards for learning, (2) defining and making explicit methods for compiling, analyzing, and interpreting this aggregate evidence of students' learning, (3) collecting, compiling and interpreting aggregate evidence about students' learning, in relation to the criteria and standards, and (4) using these interpretations to improve the design of curricula and instruction.

http://facultydevelopment.csuci.edu/assessment.htm (Ed Nuhfer, California State University - Channel Islands)

Assessment Benefits for Faculty:

From Ed Nuhfer (CSU – CI) -

- Evidence of student learning within a course is a valuable component of the materials a faculty member submits for peer review for personnel purposes and would be more useful than the casual drop-ins by senior faculty members that often are considered to constitute peer review of teaching

From Lynda Harding (California State University, Fresno) -

- Accepting evidence of student learning as part of a teaching portfolio encourages a scholarly approach to teaching, especially if the campus culture is such that SoTL publications, and not just disciplinary publications, carry weight in personnel decisions

http://www.csufresno.edu/aps/forms_policies/apm/200.shtml

Defusing Assessment Resistance:

From Lynda Harding (CSU – F) -

- When establishing an assessment program, develop a policy that states assessment data would not be used for personnel decisions and the data are property of the assessing unit

- Require departments to report assessment activities carried out and how they had responded to the results, but do not require submission of the data
• Example of policy (#204): http://www.csufresno.edu/aps/forms_policies/apm/200.shtml

• It is important to clearly communicate with faculty the distinction between the assessment of student learning outcomes for purposes of program improvement and the assessment that faculty members routinely do as part of their teaching

What is Needed in Assessment?

From Lynda Harding (CSU – F) -

• Assessments that are validated via various appropriate analyses, comparable by virtue of being common across courses (or addressing specific, common criteria), and scored in similar ways (e.g., common rubrics for common elements)

• The data should be carefully collected (e.g., under controlled conditions), analyzed in similar (if not identical) ways, reported in understandable formats, and interpreted using understood and applied rules

• There must be ways to account for contextual differences (e.g., class size; lecture v. studio classes) and individual differences that could impact achievement

• How convincing the evidence needs to be depends on the audience for the results. The standards for convincing me to tweak my use of service learning would be much lower than the standards for a publication on the effectiveness of service learning in a science class. Also, the nature of the evidence can vary with the discipline (Mary Taylor Huber and Sherwyn P. Morreale, *Disciplinary Styles in the Scholarship of Teaching*, Stylus Publishing, 2002). This isn't a problem when you're using the results for course or program improvement, since you're trying to convince yourself or your colleagues

Multiple Sources of Data for Assessment:

From Steve Erhmann (Teaching, Learning, and Technology Group) -

• It can be risky when faculty grade students by putting too much emphasis on too few sources of data. In each case, the risk is corruption of both the assessment and also of the activity being assessed

• Though it seems attractive and efficient to put all your eggs in one assessment basket (put a lot of effort into designing one great test, and then rely totally on that one source of data), it's actually a bad idea. Instead use multiple sources of data about learning. That may run the risk of being less 'fair' and 'objective,' but it's a better way to maintain the integrity of assessment, teaching, and learning

Assessment of Student Learning and Teaching Evaluations (various thoughts):

From Claudia Stanny (University of West Florida) -

• Documentation that the instructor engages in regular collection of meaningful assessments of student learning and uses these findings to develop or modify course materials, course structure, or teaching activities can work as evidence of quality of
teaching. This is the approach the University of West Florida took in revising its T&P guidelines. This approach has an added benefit in that faculty might develop this work into SoTL publications, which are recognized at UWF as legitimate evidence of research and scholarship. If the assessment activity extends to program-wide assessments of the department curriculum, this work can serve as evidence of service.

http://uwf.edu/academic/facultyresources/pte/pte.cfm

- An institution might use the assessment data as evidence of student learning to evaluate the quality of teaching. This practice creates an environment that might be manipulated and undermine both student learning and the validity of the assessment data as evidence of quality of teaching.

- UWF T&P guidelines: http://uwf.edu/academic/facultyresources/pte/pte.cfm

From Mike Theall (Youngstown State University) -

- Differences need to be accounted for in implicit theories and interpretations among those who see the data and make evaluative decisions. The issues surrounding the use of evidence of student achievement are as complex (perhaps even more complex) than those in student ratings. In part, this is true because we must be confident that the evidence of learning is measurable, accurate and appropriate, but also, because there must be understood ways of interpreting these data as evidence of good teaching.

- Before moving to the use of assessment data, there should be careful discussion of the kinds of learning that are expected, the kinds of evidence that will be acceptable, and the ways in which the evidence will be used. Only when there is consensus and clarity, is it safe and fair to use the data for personnel decisions.

- Good evidence of student learning can support an evaluation of teaching. This is especially true if courses include learning outcomes that are part of program or departmental assessment plans. Examples might include outcomes of introductory courses that are critical to retention and/or continued student success in the major, or courses in subjects/curricula that are hierarchical, or core course sequences that share certain learning objectives.

From George Kuh (Indiana University) and David Perry (Indiana University) -

- A key question is “what measures will we be using to assess student learning?” Indiana University has some excellent information on assessment:


- At IU, assessment by the instructors themselves includes SoTL, CATs, course portfolios, teaching portfolios, and more. The instructors are the experts in the classroom, and they get paid to appraise student learning anyways. There are a number of leaders in that field on the IUB campus. The Freshman Learning Project is impressive:

• IUPUI has done a lot of work identifying general education competencies and the Principles of Undergraduate Learning. ([http://www.iport.iupui.edu/selfstudy/tl/puls/](http://www.iport.iupui.edu/selfstudy/tl/puls/)) could provide an excellent basis for general competencies that could be mapped to individual disciplines.

• Other IU assessment includes peer observations, student evaluations, and focus groups

From Dakin Burdick (Endicott College) -

• Remember that there will be differences in amount and quality of student learning between required courses and electives, between upper division and first year classes, and between departments

From Doug Eder (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville) -

• Keep assessment of learning and evaluation of teaching separate. Why? Because if faculty members see that assessment findings are used to make decisions about promotion, merit, and tenure, the university will lose its opportunity to ask honest questions about student learning. Faculty members are fundamentally perfectionists, and even those that aren't, don't want to see their promotion, merit, and tenure hanging arbitrarily student performances. Therefore, all professors' assessment results become "perfect," because that would be the way professors would get high evaluations

• As assessment programs mature, there is a way to combine assessment and teaching evaluation, and that is through SoTL, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. A mature program with high trust may use assessment for teaching decisions if the evidence is offered by the candidate and is under the candidate's control

• In most cases, the fear faculty have about mixing assessment with personnel review lies in anticipation that the measures will be misused as badly as those derived from student ratings

From Ed Nuhfer (CSU – CI) -

• The most common faculty complaint, and I think a valid one, is that reliance on ratings causes faculty to be rated by an instrument that reveals neither what their students learned nor how well they learned it. There is no meaningful translation from teacher-centered to a learner-centered paradigm if the evaluative system remains anachronistic. That "neither" is what assessment, not faculty evaluation, supplies

• If assessment instruments are appropriately designed to supply that knowledge, there's no good reason that these might not carry equal or greater weighting of importance with summative student ratings in the evaluative process. Personnel evaluation that does not take into account student learning seems increasingly akin to attending an "art show" in which the awards are really based on how the artists look, and the participants are not allowed to see the artwork

• The danger in blindly moving assessment into evaluation lies in unwittingly employing measures over which the faculty have no control and then holding the faculty accountable for the results
Higher education would be more productive if it paid more attention to the work being done and less in trying to rank-order the people doing it. If there must be a separation, let it be those achieving good reputations and those who are going to receive help in producing better work.

Apprentices want to learn from those with good reputations. A place where those with good reputations want others to succeed would yield a much better kind of institution. Margaret Wheatley pointed out that most that succeed in an organization usually succeed because others want them to. Fill the organization with people who want others to succeed, and you have an organization capable of doing what others can't even dream about doing.

**How Public Should Assessment Information Be?**

*From Dakin Burdick (Endicott College)* -

- For public institutions, assessment should be very transparent

*From Doug Eder (SUIE)* -

- This is each institution's decision. Plans, in general, are public documents, especially at state universities. Results are public or private, depending on levels of trust and individual cultural traditions. The point of assessment is, generally, improvement of student learning. An accompanying question is, "What do we need to do so that we improve...and keep improving?" If this means a private assessment program, good. If it means public openness and peer scrutiny, also good

*From Mike Theall (Youngstown State University)* -

- Making assessment data public at the course level may be restricted by FERPA or other regulations. Assessment plans and reports at the program or department (or higher) levels are often public (especially in public institutions). Accreditors certainly want to see such documentation

- It may be dangerous (for accountability & transparency reasons) to not have a public assessment plan and some available assessment results. Plans like "voluntary system of accountability" (often a misnomer because it seems that non-participation results in penalties) require publication of certain kinds of results that are then used to compare public institutions and affect resource allocation

**What Level of Assessment is Most Helpful?**

*From John Collins (University of British Columbia)* -

- Course-level assessments are decidedly weaker if there's no coherent program-level curriculum
• There's been considerable work done on this topic -- often under the label of "curriculum alignment". Some of its more noteworthy authors are Harden, English, Steffy, Squires, Britton, Robley, Tariq, Sumsion, and Goodfellow

• Unless the overall curriculum (1) declares what student outcomes should be, then explicitly (2) teaches that material, (3) examines how well it has been learned, and then specifically (4) assesses student performance to verify it, then any course level assessments may be simply fortunate happenstance

• "Curriculum Mapping" exercises can occur at the institution-wide level for generic student competencies or at the departmental level, program, or even the course level -- especially for multi-section courses

• The first challenge is to reach consensus on what the intended outcomes actually are

  From Lynda Harding (CSU – F) -

• Except for things such as ensuring consistency across multi-section courses, avoid course level assessment as long as possible. A focus on program level assessment requires faculty members to discuss and agree upon what students will be able to do when they finish the program and discuss where in the curriculum the agreed upon skills and knowledge are to be attained. Those two steps often result in curriculum redesign even before any assessment data have been obtained

• Program level assessment activities embedded within courses are more palatable when they are thought of as assessing the students' learning up to that point, not just within that course. Faculty examining sampled lab reports from introductory and advanced science courses may find some deficiencies common across students. The ensuing discussion is important. (Goes something like this: Students can't write; we need to redesign the rubric; maybe our standards are a tad high; perhaps this particular skill requires even more opportunity for practice than we've been providing...). At some point, the talk may move to recommending changes in the introductory labs, but the discussion is about aligning instruction with agreed upon goals, not about the instructor's inadequacies as a teacher

AAC&U Value Rubrics Example:

From Lynda Harding (CSU – F) -

This open source use of Sakai/OSP implements the AAC&U VALUE rubrics within a customizable portfolio workflow and shows how OSP Evaluation Forms can be used to create rubrics that allow instructors to click the descriptor for each criterion that represents the work of a specific student and, assuming that each criterion is equally weighted, view the average score for that student on that rubric: http://openedpractices.org/practice/assessing-student-learning-using-aacu-value-rubrics

Time Frame for Assessment:

  From Lynda Harding (CSU – F) -
Everything hinges upon first articulating the reason(s) for doing assessment. On my campus, we decided early on that the primary purpose of outcomes assessment was program improvement, defined mostly as improved student learning. Thus, faculty members within a program systematically look at student work across students to identify strengths or weaknesses of the program. They celebrate the strengths and look for ways to improve weak areas, collecting another round of data to see how their "improvements" worked out. Similarly, a faculty member might collect data across students within a course to test the effectiveness an implementation of a teaching innovation. It is the purpose of assessment that determines the time frame for your activities.

This doesn't mean that you need to collect the same data every year. There are likely several major learning outcomes and program-related issues to assess. It's important to prioritize assessment work to maximize its possible beneficial effect, starting with burning questions and low-hanging fruit. It could be quite frustrating to collect a bunch of data related to something you have no power to change.