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# peerReview

EMERGING TRENDS AND KEY DEBATES IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

## Engaging Departments Assessing Student Learning



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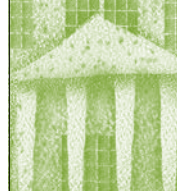
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In the lead article for the Fall 2008 *Peer Review*, Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) stated, “No significant problem can be solved through the lens of a single discipline. Real big questions do not come nicely sorted out as ‘I belong to economics’ or ‘I belong to psychology.’ As such, we’re seeing examples of new curricula both in departments and in advanced general education that are organized around big themes and big questions and deliberately link different courses and disciplines in exploration of the question.”

To promote and support this call to help students explore the big questions and to further advance a set of Essential Learning Outcomes, developed as part of its LEAP initiative, AAC&U is fostering more intentional collaboration among departments and disciplines through the Engaging Departments Institute, launched in 2009. These cross-cutting learning outcomes must be developed in general education and reinforced in the major. The Engaging Departments Institute is designed to help institutions develop these collegewide learning goals across all disciplines and departments.

This institute, now in its sophomore year, offers campus teams intensive, structured time to advance plans to foster, assess, and improve student learning within departments and across the institution. AAC&U received significant input from educational leaders and faculty from around the country when, with the support of the Teagle Foundation, we convened four regional meetings of faculty and administrators from public and private, two- and four-year campuses to explore how departments can become supportive and intentional communities of practice for student learning. As it developed the institute curriculum, AAC&U drew from these discussions and other discussions with leaders from disciplinary and accrediting bodies.

The institute faculty is composed of national and international leaders on student learning, outcomes assessment, leadership, and faculty development, as well as current and former deans and department chairs with extensive experience guiding significant change efforts to integrate high-quality learning into the majors and across the curriculum and cocurriculum.

In preparation for editing this issue of *Peer Review*, last July I traveled to the inaugural Engaging Departments Institute in Philadelphia, situated on the bustling campus of the University of Pennsylvania. At this meeting, I had the chance to attend ses-

sions from the various tracks—educational leadership; the aims and outcomes of contemporary education; faculty work; and the learning, assessment, and improvement cycle—and I talked with participants from the twenty-five campus teams attending the institute. I spoke with many faculty members and administrators, all of whom were engaged and energized by the institute presentations and plenaries.

My most memorable conversation at the institute was with a young religion professor who had never attended an AAC&U meeting. He’d come to the institute with a team of administrators and senior faculty members from other departments and found it exciting to be in the position to effect change at his institution. And although this was his first attempt at campus reform work, he felt his contributions were appreciated by his colleagues as they mapped out strategies to improve student learning for the fall semester and beyond. This experience, he told me, made him feel renewed and valued as a faculty member.

Of course, the most important work is done not at the institute, but in the days and months that follow it. In January 2010, several members from Engaging Departments Institute teams came together at AAC&U’s annual meeting to report on progress made on their action plans created last summer in Philadelphia. I was impressed by how many turned out for an early Saturday morning gathering to share their campus experiences with the institute staff and their fellow institute participants. From this and other feedback, the upcoming 2010 Engaging Departments Institute will offer a program that builds on the successes of the first institute with a program that continues to promote collaborative campus efforts to improve student learning.

As I worked on this important issue of *Peer Review* with the Engaging Departments Institute staff, we brainstormed with illustrator Dave Cutler about the best graphic metaphor for the cover that would convey the notion of departments working together for institutional change. Through this whimsical illustration, Cutler handily depicts the spirit of the Engaging Departments Institute and the hard work of building and rebuilding our departments in our colleges and universities to achieve institution-wide learning outcomes.

—SHELLEY JOHNSON CAREY

# The Engaging Departments Institute: Fostering Alignment of Learning Outcomes across Departmental Majors

► **Ashley Finley**, director of assessment for learning, Association of American Colleges and Universities

If someone has attended any one of the three AAC&U summer institutes, they know not to mistake these multiday affairs for the typical conferences we academics have come to expect. Granted, the institutes do possess some common traits of the kindred conference: social receptions, presentations of big ideas and intellectual inquiry, networking opportunities, sightseeing (and shopping) respites. The difference, however, is that the AAC&U institutes connect these facets within a single, overarching principle—teamwork. These summer gatherings provide space for individual passions and expertise to move beyond office silos in order to connect with colleagues, who may not always be like-minded but do share a common sense of purpose for institutional advancement. And perhaps nowhere is that movement from office silos to collaboration more visible than at the Engaging Departments Institute. At this institute, faculty members come together from across departments to identify, implement and assess the common learning outcomes that span major areas of study and disciplinary content.

On average, about one half of a college student's total coursework occurs within his or her chosen major. This reality, along with contributions to general education curricula, highlights the central role of academic departments in helping to align institutional learning outcomes across both curricular and cocurricular experiences. And although the institute is called “Engaging Departments,” it is really about engaging the faculty who compose, lead, and shape these departments. Thus in bringing together faculty from across disciplines, the institute invites them to ask: “How can the breadth of knowledge and skills provided by a liberal education be better infused with the depth of content provided by the majors to produce graduates who possess both the knowledge of their chosen discipline and the ability to apply, integrate, and advance that knowledge regardless of context?” For many teams, answering this

question often meant first asking a host of others: What learning outcomes are applicable across majors? Which outcomes align with general education goals? How has the notion of a “department” been conceived? Who are the campus champions of this work? Who are the change agents and the stakeholders? Where are the obstacles and forces of resistance?

Francis Bacon once wrote, “Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.” To enable campus teams to begin to find answers for the preceding questions, the institute schedule and curriculum invites the same kind of engagement, discussion, and reflection to which Bacon's quote alludes. The structure of the institute incorporates assigned readings, discussion with team members, consultation with institute faculty and staff, and a final culminating written exercise in the form of a campus action plan. To produce a document outlining the actionable next steps for advancing change at their institution, teams collaborated intensively over four days, attending faculty-led sessions on related topics of reform, often taking the opportunity to engage with other campus teams and workshoping ideas and solutions to common roadblocks to change.

Although the institute itself is a focal point of this issue and of the narratives within it, the institute is by no means the core. The core of this issue of *Peer Review*, rather, is the teamwork achieved within each campus team and across institutions. And, though the institute often acted as catalyst, a conduit, and maybe even a place of genesis for the work, it cannot be credited with the endurance needed to achieve change once participants returned to campus. These *Peer Review* articles were written in the spirit of the collective capabilities fostered by teamwork and the processes of collaborative change that are the real engines of reform efforts. To this end, we asked campus contributors to tell their stories of what brought them to the insti-



tute, what happened while there, and what issues followed them back home. This issue contains voices representing just a fraction of the diversity that populates the landscape of higher education: a large, public university; a university that adheres to the mission of a Historically Black University; a private, metropolitan university; a residential, private liberal arts college; and a community college serving a broad and varied student population.

Though there are myriad differences across these institutions, the narratives in these articles remind us of the ideas, obstacles, and passions that resonate regardless of institutional type, creed, location, or affiliation. For example, California State University at Monterey Bay (CSU–MB), like many institutions, is negotiating the challenges of curriculum reform in a time of great economic challenge. Team members from CSU–MB offer multiple vantage points on how they have worked to translate a recent program review into an effort to map outcomes across the curriculum and build a cohesive assessment agenda. Indeed, assessment was on the minds of many institute participants. Team members from Norfolk State University describe their work on developing a mapping model for tracing learning outcomes across the curriculum and the additional effort to assess the efficacy of the curriculum maps itself. A member of George Washington University’s team offers his perspective on building a culture of assessment—a critical, and often challenging, piece of the overall assessment picture for many institutions. The contribution from Siena College reminds us that most institutions are at varying stages of progress with regard to reform. While we often talk about mapping the curriculum for purposes of assessment, Siena’s narrative illustrates the processes of the *conceptual* mapping of reform by walking readers through the early stages of assessment and revision while also mindfully navigating the obstacles and realities of campus culture.

A final narrative from Eugenio María de Hostos Community College provides a reminder of the familiar drivers of change: meeting the needs of a large, diverse student body; addressing retention issues; helping students to connect the dots of their coursework; and building a community of learners in the process. In meeting these challenges, the authors describe how they became a community of learners themselves by looking carefully at both national and campus level work to guide their own institutional reform.

Finally, the campus narratives are bookended by two perspective pieces from Jo Beld, director of academic research and planning at St. Olaf College and a faculty consultant during the institute, and Michael Middaugh, associate provost for institutional effectiveness at the University of Delaware and incoming chair of the Middle States Commission. Beld’s piece invites readers to consider the multidimensionality of achieving successful, department-level assessment and the rewards that can be reaped from a job well done. As the voice from a large, regional accrediting body, Middaugh illustrates why the labors of departmental alignment across meaningful learning outcomes is a welcomed and encouraged endeavor for demonstrating institutional advancement within the national context.

As we look forward to the second year of the Engaging Departments Institute, AAC&U staff will revisit both the markers that define the institute’s success and our achievement of them. Just like the campus teams that attended the institute, we will assess our efforts, talk among ourselves, and evaluate our goals for the coming year. Ultimately our success is not measured by number of participants; it is measured by our ability to assist campuses in achieving their own unique goals. We hope the Engaging Departments Institute will continue to be a part of that process for years to come. ■

# AAC&U MEETINGS

## SUMMER INSTITUTES

### GENERAL EDUCATION AND ASSESSMENT

June 4–9, 2010

University of Vermont

### GREATER EXPECTATIONS

June 16–20, 2010

Vanderbilt University

### ENGAGING DEPARTMENTS

July 7–11, 2010

University of Pennsylvania

## NETWORK MEETINGS

### FACING THE DIVIDES: Diversity, Learning, and Pathways to Inclusive Excellence

October 21–23, 2010

Houston, Texas

### CREATIVITY, INQUIRY, AND DISCOVERY: Undergraduate Research In and Across the Disciplines

November 11–13, 2010

Durham, North Carolina

### GENERAL EDUCATION AND ASSESSMENT

March 3–5, 2011

Chicago, Illinois

### STEM AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

March 24–26, 2011

Miami, Florida



## Engaging Departments in Assessing Student Learning Overcoming Common Obstacles

► **Jo Michelle Beld**, professor of political science and director of evaluation and assessment, St. Olaf College

Assessment helps us figure out whether our students are learning what we think we're teaching.  
—*Chemistry faculty member*

Discussing how to go about assessing the intended learning outcomes of our major led to some of the best—and longest!—conversations we've ever had about pedagogy.  
—*Romance languages faculty member*

Assessment played a key role in being awarded an NSF grant for curriculum and pedagogical innovation, and now that the grant is completed, we're able to show convincingly that it had great results.  
—*Psychology faculty member*

Assessment can be useful in the classroom insofar as it helps make our expectations more transparent to our students.  
—*Political science faculty member*

**A**ssessment at the department level is a bit like living in Minnesota—it's not always easy, but in the long run, it's worth it. To be sure, gathering credible evidence of student learning in a major, minor, or concentration takes commitment, creativity, and, occasionally, some courage. But as a growing number of faculty are finding, there can be real payoffs to the work, particularly at the department level.

At St. Olaf College—an academically rigorous, nationally ranked liberal arts institution in Northfield, Minnesota—a “utilization-focused” approach to assessment has enhanced meaningful departmental engagement with evidence of student learning. With assessment projects centered on “intended uses by intended users,” departments are using results in a variety of ways, from redesigning gateway courses to redirecting feedback on student writing. A utilization focus is helping many departments begin to realize some of the rewards that thoughtful assessment can deliver without the excessive burdens that many faculty fear.

### THE CHALLENGES OF ASSESSMENT AT THE DEPARTMENT LEVEL

The challenges of department-level assessment are all too familiar. The following challenges are among the most pressing.

*Fear of compromised autonomy.* Most midcareer and senior faculty remember the early days of assessment, when the principal, if not sole, purpose of the work seemed to be accountability (“Prove you're doing your job”), and the principal audience for the results consisted of administrators and accreditors. Although the climate for assessment has changed considerably in recent years, there remains a lingering suspicion of assessment as a threat to faculty autonomy. For some, assessment raises the specter of standardized curriculum, paint-by-numbers pedagogy, and teaching to the test so institutions can “pass accreditation.” Understood in this way, assessment runs head-on into the two most highly valued qualities of faculty work life—freedom in determining course content, and professional independence and autonomy (DeAngelo et al.



2009). It is therefore actively resisted as an encroachment on academic freedom. Other colleagues voice the opposite concern—that assessment reports are simply put in a file drawer and hauled out only when the next accreditation review rolls around. They associate assessment with the “institutional procedures and red tape” that nearly three-quarters of faculty consider to be a source of stress in their jobs (DeAngelo et al. 2009). In either case, whether assessment is viewed as an occasion for unwarranted administrative interference with faculty work, or as a useless exercise in bureaucratic paper-pushing, it smacks of top-down decision-making. It has not helped matters that, despite genuine efforts by many institutions to foster grassroots faculty ownership of assessment, responsibility for leading the effort still rests principally with academic administrators.

*Methodological skepticism.* There are at least two different versions of this concern. Some faculty dismiss assessment as a reductionist enterprise, inappropriate to the complex outcomes of higher education. They are particularly skeptical about measuring outcomes in a major or other academic concentration, where student learning is expected to reach its greatest depth and sophistication. Other faculty take the opposite tack, arguing that valid assessment is too methodologically complicated for most faculty to undertake. These colleagues associate assessment with the publishable—and generally quantitative—work undertaken by statisticians and educational researchers. While this is a problem for assessment in general, it’s magnified in department-level assessment. At the institutional level, responsibility for figuring out what and how to assess often rests with an institutional research office or a specially appointed faculty member with released time and a small professional development budget. But at the department level, assessment responsibility rests

with the members of the department themselves, most of whom feel underprepared and ill-equipped. The practical conclusion reached by both camps is the same: departmentally conducted assessment is unlikely to tell us anything meaningful about our students.

*Lack of time.* Nearly three-quarters of faculty members at four-year institutions report lack of time as a source of stress—second only to “self-imposed high expectations” (DeAngelo et al. 2009). Busy faculty committed to high-quality teaching, trying to maintain a scholarly research agenda, and increasingly engaged in a broad array of governance and administrative responsibilities are understandably drawn to activities with more immediate and certain payoff than assessment. Competing demands for faculty time are problematic not only for individual faculty members, but for departments as a whole;

*Whether assessment is viewed as an occasion for unwarranted administrative interference with faculty work, or as a useless exercise in bureaucratic paper-pushing, it smacks of top-down decision-making.*

as any chair will attest, the array and complexity of responsibilities departments are expected to carry out continues to expand (Sorcinelli and Austin 2006). Assessment is understandably perceived as just one more thing departments have to do, and ironically, as something that takes precious time away from the very thing it’s supposed to foster—improved teaching and learning. As one chair said to me in the early phases of department-level assessment at our institution, “If I have to choose between the long line of students waiting outside my door during office hours and the assessment report I’m supposed to write for my associate dean, the students will win every time!”

## RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES: A UTILIZATION FOCUS IN DEPARTMENT-LEVEL ASSESSMENT

Suspicion, skepticism, and stress are powerful disincentives for departments to invest in assessing student learning. But these conditions are by no means unique to assessment; they characterize the conduct of most program evaluations, whatever their organizational context. In *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, Michael Patton (2008) argues that the central challenge in evaluation research is “doing evaluations that are useful and actually used” (xiv). The model of “utilization-focused evaluation” that Patton developed in response to this challenge is readily adaptable to the conduct of assessment in higher education, which is essentially a specific domain of applied evaluation research. Utilization-focused assessment turns on the core question, “What evidence

of student learning do we need to help us identify and sustain what works, and find and fix what doesn’t?” Like effective teaching, effective assessment begins with the end in mind. Below are key features of St. Olaf’s model.

*Focusing on intended users and uses.* Patton’s research on effective evaluation practice begins with the observation that evaluation processes and results are much more likely to be used to inform program decisions and practices when there is an identifiable individual or group who personally cares about an evaluation and the findings it generates (44). Consequently, the best starting point for assessment planning is not with the details of sampling or instrumentation, but with the question,

Who has a stake in the evidence to be gathered, and what will they do with the results? Patton also argues convincingly that methodological choices should be governed by users and uses—not simply to foster ownership of the results, but to enhance their quality (243ff). At St. Olaf, a focus on intended users and uses has made a significant difference in both the design of departmental assessment projects and faculty engagement in the effort. Departments are encouraged to structure assessment efforts around a concrete problem of practice: the number or distribution of their major requirements, the content of key courses, the scaffolding they provide prior to advanced assignments, or the sequencing of instruction across courses. More than one chair has said that the focus on the department's own questions has signaled a genuine and welcome shift in the premises that govern the college's program of assessment.

*Limiting the agenda.* Purposeful inquiry is focused inquiry (Patton 2008, 170). The number of questions that can be asked about a program always exceeds the time and energy available to answer them. Moreover, if the goal of gathering evidence is to improve practice, then faculty need time to interpret and act on the evidence they gather. Consequently, the expectations for the scope of the departmental assessment projects undertaken in a given year at St. Olaf are intentionally modest.

When departments were initially asked to articulate intended learning outcomes for the majors, concentrations, and other academic programs they offer, they were encouraged to focus on outcomes distinctive to their program and to limit the number of outcomes to five or fewer. When they were subsequently asked to begin gathering evidence of student learning, they were asked to choose only one outcome as the focus of their efforts, and, as described above, to select an outcome related to a practical concern. In assessment, as in so many other features of academic life, less really is more.

*Treating findings as a means to an end, not as ends in themselves.* In utilization-focused assessment, the findings are not an end in themselves, but rather a means to the larger end of improving teaching and learning (Patton 2008, 68ff). The guidelines for the “assessment action reports” prepared by departments at St. Olaf reflect this premise explicitly. The first—and principal—question departments are asked to address in these reports is not, What were the results of your rubric/test/survey/portfolio analysis? but rather, Which features of your major/concentration are likely to be continued, and which might be modified or discontinued, on the basis of the evidence you gathered about student learning? In describing their intended actions, departments are encouraged to cite only the results that

pertain to the continuities and/or changes they anticipate. Finally, they are invited to indicate the practical support they need from their associate deans in order to carry out their plans. In this reporting model, assessment results are treated as they should be—as supporting material for conclusions the department has reached about its program, rather than as the conclusions themselves.

## THE PAYOFFS OF UTILIZATION-FOCUSED ASSESSMENT FOR DEPARTMENTS

Utilization-focused assessment at St. Olaf has begun to mitigate the challenges to departmental engagement with evidence of student learning. Concerns about compromised autonomy, meaningless results, and wasted time begin to dissipate when departments themselves are treated as both the agenda-setters and the primary audience for the evidence they gather. Utilization-focused assessment provokes less anxiety about either bureaucratic interference or administrative indifference, because it is the department itself that is the principal respondent to the evidence. Methodological skepticism is moderated when departments are encouraged to observe (rather than “measure”) and summarize (rather than “quantify”) information about student learning in ways that are consistent with both their disciplinary methods and their pedagogical practices. And while assessment still requires an investment of precious faculty time, the investment is less burdensome when the agenda is limited and linked to practical questions of genuine faculty concern. For all these reasons, utilization-focused assessment is beginning to pay off at the department level, and the results are making a discernable difference in departmental discussions and decisions. The following are payoffs that we have realized.

*Fostering shared understandings and commitments.* Faculty from the St. Olaf depart-







ment of religion recently gathered evidence of its students' ability to "form, evaluate, and communicate critical and normative interpretations of religious life and thought" by assessing a sample of senior essays against a rubric they had developed for the purpose. Both the process of developing and applying the rubric and consideration of the findings fostered several kinds of shared understandings among the members of the department: first, a clearer and more explicit understanding of the learning goal itself and how to recognize it in student work; second, a commitment to developing and communicating common goals for writing instruction in the required intermediate-level core course; and finally, a commitment to requiring a substantial writing project in all advanced seminars, so that all students will have at least two opportunities to undertake this kind of writing in the major. These decisions will not only enhance the faculty's shared understanding of "critical and normative interpretations of religious life and thought," but will also extend that understanding to students.

*Informing pedagogical practices.* Faculty in the St. Olaf management studies concentration focused their 2008–09 assessment effort on students' ability to "work effectively in teams to accomplish organizational goals." For the past two academic years, the Principles of Management course, which is required of all management studies concentrators, has been structured around the pedagogical principles of team-based learning (Michaelsen, Knight, and Fink 2002). Most class sessions begin with short quizzes on assigned readings, completed first by individual students and then by teams. Over three semesters of evidence-gathering in this course, each team consistently outperformed its highest-scoring individual member. Consequently, the program faculty have decided to continue the use of team-based learning in the Principles

course; to use elements of team-based learning in the accounting and marketing courses; and to convert the corporate finance and investments courses to team-based learning in fall 2010. The systematic evidence gathered in the Principles course is allowing program faculty to make a collective, evidence-based decision about pedagogy across an array of courses, and to demonstrate powerfully to their students (many of whom have had negative experiences with group work in the past) that the time they invest in learning to work effectively in teams is well spent.

Several other departments are using assessment results to fine-tune instruction in one or more of their key courses. For example, a department in the social sciences found that, although student papers in advanced seminars were generally proficient, students were better at crafting clear and contestable thesis statements than they were at invoking disciplinary theory. The department plans to provide explicit instruction to enhance students' ability to engage theoretical debates in their research papers. A natural sciences department is rewriting its laboratory safety policies and procedures document on the basis of the lab safety quiz it developed and administered to its majors. A department in the humanities is planning to use its writing rubric not just as an assessment instrument, but as a teaching tool in advanced research and writing courses. None of these departments discovered glaring deficiencies in their students' learning, and none are planning a wholesale overhaul of their curriculum or instructional practices. But they did discover patterns of relative strength and weakness that could be readily—and confidently—addressed in specific courses.

*Securing resources.* Assessment is an increasingly important consideration in grant applications for improving curriculum and instruction; it can help make the case that a proposed project is needed,

and it can also provide evidence of departmental capacity to document project outcomes. The St. Olaf department of psychology has incorporated both kinds of arguments in successful bids for both internal and external funding. Assessment findings were part of the rationale for a college-funded curriculum improvement grant recasting the department's introductory lab course as a gateway course for majors rather than a general education course for students in any discipline. Assessment capacity supported a successful departmental request to the National Science Foundation to lead a national project integrating investigative psychophysiology lab experiences in introductory psychology courses, to increase students' understanding of psychology as a natural science. Utilization-focused assessment has helped this department leverage resources for instructional improvement.

Utilization-focused assessment is not a panacea—it won't erase antipathy to administrative directives, resolve longstanding methodological disputes within departments, or eliminate pressures on faculty time. But it can make the work of assessment, increasingly an established feature of departmental life, both more manageable and more meaningful for the faculty who care most about the results. ■

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# Mapping General Education Outcomes in the Major: Intentionality and Transparency

- **Nuria M. Cuevas**, dean, College of Liberal Arts, Norfolk State University  
**Alexei G. Matveev**, director, quality enhancement and critical thinking studies, Norfolk State University  
**Khadijah O. Miller**, department head, interdisciplinary studies, Norfolk State University

One of the fundamental purposes of general education programs is to prepare students for further studies in their major by developing a broad knowledge base, foundational intellectual skills, and dispositions for lifelong learning. Indeed, a central component of faculty members' professional responsibility is "designing and implementing programs of general education and specialized study that intentionally cultivate the intended learning" (AAC&U 2006, 1.) However, the murky interface between the two domains of college curriculum—general education and specialized study in the major—has long been an area of concern for curriculum developers. Colleges and universities traditionally have been called to develop and implement mechanisms to systematically bridge institutional goals and the goals within the major curricula.

What appears to be new in the rapidly emerging global society is the increased intensity of employers' demands for institutions to significantly enhance efforts in facilitating and ensuring student development of transferable general education competencies. Consequently, institutions are increasingly required by accreditors, legislators, and funders to demonstrate the intentionality and transparency of their academic programs by describing how majors integrate institution-wide core competencies that traditionally belonged to the general education domain. Similarly, professional organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) advance integration of liberal education outcomes both in the general education program and the major (AAC&U 2009).

We propose that the development of curriculum maps is a necessary first step in addressing AAC&U's (2008) call for institutions to articulate clear and complementary responsibilities between general education and majors for institution-wide core competencies, thus laying out effective and efficient pathways for students to progress through the general education and major curricula. AAC&U (2007) advocates providing students with a compass to help them navigate through the complexities of the college curricula by articulating clear statements of intended learning outcomes as reference points. However, for the compass to serve as a navigational instrument, students need to be provided with maps that visually set the reference points or outcomes in the topographic contexts or program curricula.

This article provides a brief overview of a program curriculum mapping model—a practical tool that a number of departments at Norfolk State University (NSU) utilize—to study and improve transparency and intentionality of degree program curricula in the context of institution-wide, general education core competencies. NSU is a four-year comprehensive university offering a broad range of undergraduate and graduate programs. It is an urban, historically black university (HBCU) with a culturally diverse student population of 7,000. The NSU team participated in the inaugural AAC&U Engaging Departments Institute in summer 2009.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

NSU's curriculum mapping model views program curriculum as a complex dynamic system with interdependent components that



are intentionally positioned relative to each other to facilitate student achievement of intended learning outcomes. In conceptualizing curriculum as a system, faculty members concentrate less on what the individual courses are contributing and focus instead on how the interactions among them affect overall student learning and development. The fundamental purpose of NSU's curriculum mapping process is to develop curriculum awareness among faculty (Palomba and Banta 1999)—an ability to look at programs at a level beyond individual courses and ensure that program curricula provide appropriate conditions for student achievement of intended program and institution-wide learning outcomes.

The NSU curriculum mapping model is based on the general curriculum alignment concept similar to mapping approaches described by Allen (2004; 2006), Driscoll and Wood (2007), and Maki (2004). A distinctive characteristic of the NSU model is that it is intentionally designed to capture the degree of curriculum coherence by systematically exploring alignment between and among five major curriculum components: intended outcomes, courses, syllabi, instructional activities, and assessment of learning through the lens of intentionality and transparency.

In the NSU model, curriculum *intentionality* is defined as deliberate and systematic alignment of intended program learning outcomes with course-level outcomes and instructional and learning activities. Curriculum intentionality is delineated along several dimensions. Intentional curricula are built on well-articulated statements of intended learning outcomes that clearly specify and communicate fundamental knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions that faculty members expect students to obtain at the completion of an educational program. Curricular intentionality is reflected in the extent to which each intended program

learning outcome is integrated in the sequence of courses. In an intentional curriculum, students are provided with sufficient opportunities to work on each intended outcome in multiple courses that are logically sequenced to reflect the developmental, stage-like nature of learning. Each course in the program is designed to address several program outcomes so that students are able to integrate multiple competencies in the context of a single course. Also, assessment serves as an ultimate indicator of curriculum intentionality. To guide and facilitate intentional student progression through program curricula, multiple formative and summative assessment points should be designed for each outcome.

Curriculum *transparency* is reflected in the clarity of course syllabi as well as in the development of program maps.

*Program curriculum maps serve as an essential navigational tool that visually charts outcomes, courses, instructional activities, and learning assessments in relation to each other.*

Course syllabi can play a critical role in ensuring that students clearly understand how a given course fits into the program of study. Well-designed course syllabi explicitly communicate to students how a given course addresses program and institutional outcomes addressing a common student question—"Why should I take this course?" Program curriculum maps serve as an essential navigational tool that visually charts outcomes, courses, instructional activities, and learning assessments in relation to each other. In this way faculty members can evaluate structures of curricula and help students understand the complexities of program progression pathways.

## DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICULUM MAPS

A curriculum map presents the design and sequence of courses in the context of program outcomes or general education competencies, usually in the form of a matrix or template. The NSU Curriculum Matrix is a two-dimensional data collection instrument used to organize the curriculum mapping process. The design of the matrix can be modified depending on the conceptual framework adopted by the program faculty and specific curriculum review questions that drive mapping exercises. Figure 1 presents an example of a completed matrix—a curriculum map of the NSU Interdisciplinary Studies program in the context of the university-wide general education core competencies.

The interdisciplinary studies (INT) program was selected to demonstrate the

NSU curriculum mapping approach for a few reasons. INT is the second largest academic degree program in the university. In addition, the INT curriculum is constructed with the assumption that its student population—which largely consists of returning adults, transfer, military and at a distance (online) students—would be preexposed to and equipped with the skills introduced in the general education core curriculum. However, this assumption is often not met because of the diverse prior academic experiences of students entering the INT program. This poses a significant challenge to ensure that program majors adequately develop the core competencies expected of all NSU graduates. Finally, the



interdisciplinary nature of the program highlights the intentionality and transparency of integrating general education core competencies in the major.

The sample matrix, presented in figure 1, records the assignment of selected NSU general education core competencies (in columns) to core INT program courses (in rows) listed in the order that a “typical student” would follow, while identifying the level at which the competencies are addressed in each course (at the intersec-

tion of columns and rows). The INT map is built on eight INT required courses, one required elective (CSC 200), and the most popular elective for INT majors (PSY 210).

There are three subcolumns in each core competency column. The first subcolumn is “Outcome Statement (X/M).” In this subcolumn, faculty members indicate whether the given general education core competency is explicitly or implicitly communicated to students through the syl-

labus of a given course. In the second sub-column, faculty members identify the level at which the content of a course integrates a specified general education competency (Introduced, Emphasized, Reinforced, Advanced—I, E, R, A). The level of content delivery refers to the scope and complexity of the knowledge and skills related to each general education competency. The third subcolumn is “Feedback (F).” At this stage, faculty review course syllabi assignments and indicate whether students

**FIGURE 1. INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES PROGRAM MAP**

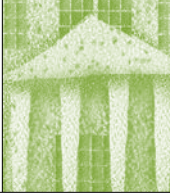
Semester	Fall 2009						
College	Liberal Arts	1. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION			2. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY LITERACY		
Department	Interdisciplinary Studies	Student is able to produce texts appropriate for their purposes and audiences as reflected in: (a) Form; (b) Organization; (c) Content development; (d) Language usage and style (syntax, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics).			Student is able to: (1) Use and apply computers, software applications, and other resources to achieve a wide variety of academic, professional, and personal goals; (2) Use a set of abilities to solve problems, collect data, manage information, communicate with others, create effective presentations, and use information to make informed decisions.		
Degree	Bachelor of Science						
CORE/REQUIRED PROGRAM COURSES		(i) Outcome Statement (X, M)	(ii) Level (I, E, R, A)	(iii) Feedback (F)	(i) Outcome Statement (X, M)	(ii) Level (I, E, R, A)	(iii) Feedback (F)
INT 308: Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies		X	I	F	X	E	F
INT 322: Critical Approaches to Analysis		X	I	F	X	R	F
PSY 210: Introduction to Psychology		X	I	F	X	E	F
INT 360: Foundations of Research in Interdisciplinary Studies		X	E	F	X	R	F
INT 375: Language and Society		X	E	F	X	R	F
CSC 200: Advanced Computer Concepts		M	E	F	X	A	F
INT 411: Ideas and their Influences		M	R	F	X	R	F
INT 412: Contemporary Globalization		M	R	F	X	R	F
INT 470: Senior Seminar		M	A	F	X	A	F
INT 477: Senior Thesis		M	A	F	X	A	F

**LEGEND**

[i] OUTCOME STATEMENT: The program outcome is x) EXPLICITLY or (m) IMPLICITLY reflected in the course syllabus as being one of the learning outcomes for this course.

[ii] LEVEL OF CONTENT DELIVERY: (I) INTRODUCED - Students are not expected to be familiar with the content or skill at the collegiate level. Instruction and learning activities focus on basic knowledge, basic level of knowledge and familiarity with the content or skills at the collegiate level. Instruction and learning activities concentrate on enhancing and strengthening knowledge, skills, and expanding competence, edge, skill, or competency at the collegiate level. Instructional and learning activities continue to build upon previous competencies with increased complexity. All components of the outcome are addressed through the use of the content or skills in multiple contexts and at multiple levels of complexity.

[iii] FEEDBACK ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE / ASSESSMENT: (F) Students are asked to demonstrate their learning on the outcome through homework, projects, tests, etc. and are provided formal Feedback.



in the given course have opportunities to demonstrate what has been learned on each general education competency and receive feedback in a formal way.

### ANALYSIS OF CURRICULUM MAPS

From a consequential validity perspective (Messick 1989), the validity of curriculum mapping is a matter of meaningful interpretation and practical uses to which the results of analysis are applied. The NSU curriculum mapping model is designed to

facilitate engagement of faculty members in a structured analysis of the extent to which program curricula intentionally and transparently integrate intended general education outcomes. The following six questions reflect our operational definition of curriculum intentionality and guide analysis and interpretation of curriculum maps.

1. Are intended general education core competencies clearly articulated? NSU general education core competencies are

well articulated with clearly delineated dimensions of learning expected from NSU graduates. However, mapping of core competencies in the major exposed a challenge of interpreting and operationally defining the core competencies at the discipline or academic field level. This challenge is evident on the INT map for the fourth competency, quantitative reasoning. The curriculum map shows that nine of ten courses do not consider quantitative reasoning an area to be addressed, yet the

## SELECTED GENERAL EDUCATION CORE COMPETENCIES

3. SCIENTIFIC REASONING			4. QUANTITATIVE REASONING			5. CRITICAL THINKING			6. ORAL COMMUNICATION		
Student is able to: (1) Propose relationships between observed phenomena; (2) Design experiments which test hypotheses concerning proposed relationships; (3) Predict logical consequences of observed phenomena and determine possible alternative outcomes; (4) Judge the degree to which a particular conclusion is justified based on the empirical evidence related to observed phenomena.			Student is able to solve problems within: (1) Numeric or arithmetic contexts; (2) Conceptual contexts; (3) Geometric contexts; (4) Data representation and chance element contexts.			Student is able to consistently and systematically: (1) Identify main ideas and/or themes; (2) Make comparative judgments from data; (3) Determine the validity/ credibility and implication of a supposition; (4) Identify limitations and contradictions in an event; (5) Analyze and evaluate arguments and issues; (6) Demonstrate creative problem solving skills; (7) Implement and evaluate a plan to work towards a goal or conclusion.			Student is able to express him or herself in a structured, meaningful, and productive manner. The student must also be able to convey his/her intentions or ideas in messages crafted to introduce, inform, or persuade the listener.		
(i) Outcome Statement (X, M)	(ii) Level (I, E, R, A)	(iii) Feedback (F)	(i) Outcome Statement (X, M)	(ii) Level (I, E, R, A)	(iii) Feedback (F)	(i) Outcome Statement (X, M)	(ii) Level (I, E, R, A)	(iii) Feedback (F)	(i) Outcome Statement (X, M)	(ii) Level (I, E, R, A)	(iii) Feedback (F)
M	I	F				X	R	F	M	E	F
X	E	F				X	R	F	M	E	F
						X	E	F	M	E	F
X	R	F				X	R	F	M	E	F
M	R	F				X	R	F	X	R	F
X	E	F				X	A	F	M		
M	R	F				X	R	F	M	R	F
M	R	F				X	R	F	M	R	F
X	R	F				X	A	F	M	A	F
X	A	F	M	E	F	X	A	F	M	A	F

skills, and/or competencies and entry-level complexity. Only one (or a few) aspect of a complex program outcome is addressed in the given course. (E) EMPHASIZED - Students are expected to possess a complexity. Several aspects of the outcome are addressed in the given course, but these aspects are treated separately. (R) REINFORCED - Students are expected to possess a strong foundation in the knowledge in the integrative contexts. (A) ADVANCED - Students are expected to possess an advanced level of knowledge, skill, or competency at the collegiate level. Instructional and learning activities focus on

back.



development and interpretation of graphs and charts, utilization of ratios, and understanding of correlations—components that many INT courses integrate—directly lend themselves to quantitative reasoning. Discussions with INT faculty revealed that quantitative reasoning is essentially seen as a discipline-specific competency that belongs to mathematics and science departments. The difference in language use, definition, and interpretation of the term “quantitative reasoning” may limit INT faculty’s realization of its part in the major. The mapping process shows that the transparency of articulation is two-dimensional, and perhaps multidirectional, as it can be interpreted or used according to our disciplinary jargon and definitions. Thus, it is critical that before engaging in core competency mapping exercises, program faculty should translate broad, institution-wide core competencies in discipline-specific terms to ensure more precise and meaningful curriculum maps.

2. *Are students provided with multiple learning opportunities to develop general education core competencies?* The philosophy of the INT program is to develop and produce graduates with transferable skills that are required in any profession. Indeed, the map shows that INT courses are well-aligned with the general education core competencies. The INT teaching modality calls for the successful student to have strong written and oral communication skills and information technology literacy. It also requires the student to be able to engage in critical thinking and scientific reasoning. Indeed, the map demonstrates a consistent emphasis on critical thinking, information technology literacy, and written and oral communication. Quantitative reasoning is clearly an area for program faculty to explore as a possible gap in constructing intentional student learning experiences.

3. *Are courses in the major sequenced in the developmental pattern to facilitate student achievement of general education core compe-*

*tencies?* INT courses begin at the 300 level and are considered junior- and senior-level courses. Ideally, prior to enrolling in interdisciplinary studies core courses, an interdisciplinary studies student would begin to develop general education competencies at the college level. Under this assumption, students taking the programmatic courses already should have been introduced (I) to general education core competencies in 100- and 200-level general education courses, and opportunities to further develop the core competencies at the E, R, and A levels are apparent. For this reason, instruction in INT core courses begins at the emphasis or reinforcement level.

In practice, this is not always the case. For example, students often take at least one general education core course while beginning their INT core curriculum coursework. In these instances, faculty advisers are often asked, “Why do I need to



take a 100-level social science course when I am taking 300-level courses in my major or concentration area?” This question highlights a possible misalignment between the level of instruction and student readiness. To address this misalignment, the INT program faculty reevaluated teaching assignments in an effort to make the developmental pattern of core competencies more explicit and consistent. This reassign-

ment of teaching loads called for senior faculty to teach introductory and capstone courses in order to improve the alignment of general education core competencies with INT core courses. In this way, INT students recognize the integral connectivity of the major and general education core competencies.

4. *Do individual courses provide students with opportunities to integrate multiple core competencies?* The essential question here is whether the focus of the course is broad or narrow in the context of the general education core competencies. The curriculum map demonstrates the INT program provides students with ample opportunities to integrate disciplinary knowledge as well as further develop, use and share multiple core competencies. Two elective courses address four of six competencies, seven INT courses incorporate five of six competencies, and the capstone course (INT 477) integrates all six core competencies. From the course-level perspective, the curriculum map confirms that quantitative reasoning is a competency that needs to be more explicitly integrated in various courses.

5. *Are students provided with feedback on their progress in mastering core competencies?* The curriculum map demonstrates that formative and summative assessments of student achievement of core competencies are consistently embedded in the courses and are clearly the strength of the program. Indeed, the interdisciplinary content and nature of the program requires an exchange of knowledge between the instructor and student to decipher, assess, and evaluate skills. Hence, feedback is an important part of the process of integrating disciplinary knowledge within a broader context of general education core competencies. The program analysis of the INT curriculum map confirms programmatic emphasis on feedback and the exchange of knowledge between instructor and student.

Curriculum maps also can assist the program faculty with identifying specific



courses for program assessment of core competencies, thus keeping the assessment focused and manageable. For example, INT 308 and INT 375 can provide information for formative assessment since they respectively emphasize and reinforce the core competencies. INT 477 can clearly be used for summative assessment since it addresses all six core competencies, with five competencies at the advanced level.

6. *How well are the institution-wide general education core competencies communicated to students in course syllabi?* The focus of this step of the analysis is whether students receive appropriate syllabus guidance to develop and master core competencies. If the given general education core competency is, in fact, addressed in the course, how explicitly is the competency communicated to students in the course syllabus? Explicitly tying course outcomes to general education core competencies helps students recognize their involvement in a cohesive program.

The intended institution-wide general education core competencies are formally stated in course syllabi to highlight for students their merit and applicability. How faculty members present these statements and how students interpret the statements is variable. The curriculum map shows that general education core competencies are well reflected in course syllabi, with the exception of quantitative reasoning. However, general education core competencies are expressed differently across course syllabi. For example, information technology and critical thinking are explicitly expressed as important course goals, while written communication, scientific reasoning, and especially oral communication are not directly communicated to students.

## CONCLUSION

When the curriculum mapping model was developed at NSU in 2003–04, the process was new for many faculty members. As with anything new, the process caused a

wide variety of reactions ranging from frustration to acknowledgment of its potential value in examining the coherence of program curricula. While implementing curriculum mapping at NSU, it was important to realize the need to invest significant time and effort in the construction, analysis, and periodic review of the maps, in building consensus in the disciplines about the use of the labels to describe levels of content delivery (i.e., I, E, R, A), and in developing a manageable and user-friendly data collection tool (curriculum matrix). Further, we fully appreciated the advice of Sumsion and Goodfellow (2004) who underscored the importance of creating a climate of collegiality, autonomy, flexibility, and transparency in order to successfully implement the complex processes of curriculum mapping.

Despite initial and ongoing challenges, curriculum mapping processes have resulted in a number of significant benefits. Visual alignment of intended learning outcomes and program core courses presented in the maps provide a structured context for ongoing reviews of new and revised course proposals as well as the development of streamlined value-added assessment designs. The maps capture and document the manner and extent to which programs address intended learning outcomes in the curricula, thus stimulating focused, evidence-based discussions about course sequencing, prerequisites, electives, and course-embedded program assessments.

By making complex academic curricula transparent, the maps provide prospective and new students with information about the program structure and faculty expectations. Thus, the maps can be used as effective tools to facilitate student recruitment and advising, enhance student-program fit, support efficient student progression throughout the curriculum, and ensure timely graduation. Further, the maps help students see the coherence of program cur-

ricula and understand how individual program courses relate to overall institutional and program outcomes, thus contributing to the development of intentional learners.

At NSU, feedback from the curriculum mapping exercises guided the development of the university-wide course syllabus format as well as criteria for the general education core course recertification process. Program curriculum maps also help the university effectively respond to a number of accreditation standards related to curriculum review and approval processes, curriculum quality, and program assessment. ■

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# Developing the Framework for Assessing a New Core Curriculum at Siena College

► **Ralph J. Blasting**, dean of liberal arts, Siena College

**Siena College reveals the dirty secrets behind developing a campus-wide assessment plan, and asks “Are we alone?”**

When the *Peer Review* editor asked for a contribution “illuminating the complexities” of campus assessment practices, I was both flattered and apprehensive. Though our team came away from the AAC&U 2009 Engaging Departments Institute with an elegant plan to integrate the assessment of general education with assessment in the major, a follow-up report in November would represent relatively small accomplishments given that it could cover only eight weeks of the fall semester. Our campus is just beginning to develop a culture of student outcomes assessment, and simultaneously grappling with revision of our core curriculum and the development of a new strategic plan. Somehow I couldn’t help but recall Malvolio, the steward in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, who is captivated by a secret letter telling him that “some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” Encouraged by *Peer Review*, we herewith put on our yellow stockings and present ourselves to the court of academic opinion, hoping for better results than Malvolio’s.

Siena College is an undergraduate, mainly residential, liberal arts institution of 3,000 students, situated on the northern boundary of Albany, New York. We were founded by seven Franciscan friars in 1937. Our Franciscan and Catholic tradition is at the core of our mission and planning documents—although it also engenders some of the most lively campus debates about what that actually means to our curriculum and policies. Our current president, Father Kevin Mullen, took office in July 2007; we hired a new director of assessment in fall 2008 and submitted

a Middle States interim review in summer 2009. We began a fundamental review of our core curriculum in fall 2007, with a target completion date of spring 2009 and implementation for fall 2010. Presuming that a new core structure would be in place by July 2009, we applied for the Engaging Departments Institute with a team ready to draft a core assessment program at the conference. Two years ago, we had no plan for campuswide assessment of student outcomes, and few consistent programs in the majors. A new Assessment Planning Committee (APC) was formed in fall 2008, and our core review was not going particularly smoothly. The Engaging Departments Institute seemed like exactly what we would need to help us learn to create a culture of assessment within and among the academic major departments. This would be crucial to the success of the program, since academic departments have the most direct impact on students while retaining the greatest degree of autonomy. For better and worse, departmental faculty are acknowledged as the authoritative voice in the delivery and evaluation of the curriculum. While assessment expertise may vary widely among faculty and departments, the most successful programs are those that the faculty view as important and useful. Our team applied to the Engaging Departments Institute with the purpose of developing the framework for assessing our new core curriculum.

## THE INSTITUTE

A priest, a dean, a teacher, and an art historian walk into the Alumni Center at the University of Pennsylvania. This may sound like the start of a bad joke, but one of our goals was to include a diverse team of participants at the institute: all of the team members hold some level of leadership on the campus. Not all are tenured; our assessment expertise varies widely; and none of





us had been directly involved in revising the core curriculum. What we do share is an interest in practical, valid assessment practices that yield information useful to us and to our colleagues, and which can help our students to become more intentional learners. All of us teach core courses; each of our departments is committed to offering large numbers of core classes to all majors. As dean of liberal arts, I was deeply concerned about how the new core would manifest itself, as nearly half of the sections that I schedule every semester fulfill some aspect of the core. Given the political battles that had largely dominated core discussions up to spring 2009, we believed that an assessment plan for the new core would help to keep future conversations focused more precisely on educational effectiveness. Eager to spend four days in Philadelphia beginning to craft such a plan with the help of national experts, we very quickly encountered two potential obstacles. First, the core revision process was not completed in spring 2009 as planned, so we were heading to the conference without a curriculum to assess. Second, Carol Geary Schneider's plenary address on "The Integrative Work of the College Major" caused a radical shift in our thinking: perhaps because our institution's separate assessment plans for general education and majors only reinforce what Schneider described as an artificial and unhealthy division.

In many cases, we are the same faculty leading the same students toward college-wide learning goals. To be sure, the work of the majors has more disciplinary depth and is sequenced to achieve a certain level of proficiency as defined by the faculty and professionals in that field. But a typical undergraduate degree requires that about one-third of any student's coursework be taken outside of his or her chosen concentration, in what we call general education. While both faculty and students may think about general and major

coursework as two very different kinds of experiences, they must work together to create the breadth and depth so often cited as hallmarks of American liberal education. Our team, in our very first working session that evening, questioned the wisdom if not the validity of a separate assessment of general education. If almost all of our faculty in the School of Liberal Arts are teaching core courses to all majors, and if all majors consider the core an integral part of their degree, then shouldn't there be a way to assess the learning outcomes of the core *as a part of* the assessment of the major? Each major already had some sort of assessment in place, even though some are highly developed and others just beginning. Faculty tend to see their efforts on behalf of their majors as more directly relevant to their expertise and to the well-being of their departments than the energy

*In many cases, we are the same faculty leading the same students toward college-wide learning goals.*

expended on general education. Given these two premises, it seemed to us that a culture of assessment would be much more likely to take root at the department level than it would if imposed broadly across the campus—especially to assess a new core that would likely not have unqualified support. Our next job was to flesh out our ideas and bounce them off of the expert consultants available to us: the institute faculty.

As recommended prior to the conference, we divided up to attend the three different tracks of the conference (education leadership; faculty work; and the learning, assessment, and improvement cycle), coming back together to compare notes regularly. We contributed to our plan from our various perspectives. The Education Department, for example, has

extensive assessment in place, as required for their NCATE accreditation. Our chair of education is adept at organizing assessment activities to match the curricular frameworks already in place, or those anticipated in the new core. Our chair of creative arts drew from her department's experience with a new senior capstone course. The department offers one degree that allows students to concentrate in music, theater, or visual arts, so that the capstone class presents a wide variety of projects to assess. Without a lot of consistency of product among them, she has become proficient at seeing the results of broad learning goals as they are manifested in particular student products. One of our team members is a relatively new faculty member in our Religious Studies department. The department has only about a dozen majors, but serves every Siena

student with at least one course, and will be the primary guide for new "Franciscan concern" courses in the new core. While assessment practice in Religious Studies is relatively simple, the broader implications of the new core for that department are significant. The small number of majors allows the department to receive accurate data on the student experience from conducting senior exit interviews and surveys. However, all Religious Studies faculty teach a large number of nonmajors, and the department clearly has an interest in assuring that "Franciscan values" continue to play a significant role in our curriculum. Finally, as dean, I oversee eleven departments that are collectively responsible for 75 percent of the core curriculum. The group with which I meet most regularly is the department chairs, who fulfill two- or



three-year rotating duties with little compensation and no administrative support. While none categorically rejects learning outcomes assessment, all of them are concerned about developing data-collection activities that will not yield useful results proportionate to the effort expended to gather the data.

### THE PLAN

As stated in our application to the institute, our initial goal was to “create a framework for assessing the general education core.” We specifically wanted to “create and implement assessment techniques that measure the common learning goals across disciplines.” At one of the institute’s open

feedback sessions, we told our colleagues that the process we envisioned was flawed. We decided to find a way to integrate general education and major assessment within the disciplines. Specifically, we proposed to work with individual departments to find out how *they* can assess *their students’* accomplishments of collegewide learning goals as they implement their own departmental assessment plans. Because departmental learning goals are derived from the more general college goals (see fig. 1) department faculty should be able to make their own evaluations of the degree to which their students are meeting both aspects of learning. For example, one college learning goal is “informed reasoning.”

The History Department uses a capstone research project to assess its own goals, but the faculty should also be able to evaluate the level of “informed reasoning” apparent in those projects. The Finance Department might see “informed reasoning” from a different disciplinary point of view, but can still evaluate its students’ abilities in that area. Their responses would be a part of their regular assessment activities, requiring minimal additional work from the faculty. Each department submits an annual assessment report as a part of its year-end progress report. These go to the Assessment Planning Committee, made up of faculty representatives from each division. The mechanisms are therefore in place for faculty to receive and review student work, looking for accomplishment of both departmental (major) and college-wide goals (core). The department is expected to make some evaluative statements about the degree to which students are meeting their goals, with suggestions about how the department might become more effective. We might also reasonably argue that *every* core course should be addressing these skills in some way. The first step, however, is to determine whether faculty perceive any patterns of achievement or deficiency across majors. It would fall to the APC to look for patterns within the responses received from departments, and then to suggest ways to improve our core curriculum in response to that data.

### DREAMS, DOUBTS, AND PITFALLS

The dream of elegance embedded in our plan is that it uses already-established activities in departments to evaluate the success of the core curriculum. No new faculty committee would be created and no new general education assessment plan would be put into place, only to be marginalized and ignored as someone else’s problem. Faculty would be looking at their own (major) students in a more holistic way as they sought evidence of learning

### FIGURE 1. THE SIENA COLLEGE LEARNING GOALS

As a learning community and liberal arts college grounded in its Franciscan and Catholic heritage, Siena affirms the following learning goals:

#### Learning Goal 1. INFORMED REASONING (REASON)

Students will think critically and creatively to make reasoned and informed judgments. Through engagement with contemporary and enduring questions of human concern, students will solve problems in ways that reflect the integration of knowledge across general and specialized studies, and they will demonstrate competence in information literacy and independent research.

#### Learning Goal 2. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION (RHETORIC)

Students will read a variety of texts with comprehension and critical involvement, write effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences, speak knowledgeably, and listen with discernment and empathy.

#### Learning Goal 3. MEANINGFUL REFLECTION (REFLECTION)

Students will comprehend that learning is a life-long process and that personal growth, marked by concern and care for others, is enhanced by intellectual and spiritual exploration.

#### Learning Goal 4. REGARD FOR HUMAN SOLIDARITY AND DIVERSITY (REGARD)

Students will affirm the unity of the human family, uphold the dignity of individuals, and delight in diversity. They will demonstrate intercultural knowledge and respect.

#### Learning Goal 5. REVERENCE FOR CREATION (REVERENCE)

Students will demonstrate a reverence for creation. They will develop a worldview that recognizes the benefits of sustaining our natural and social worlds.

#### Learning Goal 6. MORAL RESPONSIBILITY (RESPONSIBILITY)

Students will commit to building a world that is more just, peaceable, and humane. They will lead through service.

*Approved by the Board of Instruction, November 18, 2008*



accomplished outside of the major. Finally, faculty would see major and general education as two parts of a unified experience, for which all faculty are responsible. While the assessment “data” would come in a variety of forms in response to a variety of prompts (papers, surveys, interviews, test scores), our dream included APC members who would be able to discern patterns of strength and weakness across disparate data from various departments. Looking beyond issues of validity and reliability, they would value the sometimes-intuitive feedback from a variety of disciplines to make suggestions for improvement across the board. Finally, our dream includes a presumption that faculty across disciplines can find some level of agreement on how the qualities we all seek in our students can be manifested by a graduating senior.

The doubts are obvious. Are data collected through a variety of means from a variety of disciplines “data” at all? How much validity is lost due to variation of measures and methods? Is there any consistency among faculty as they seek evidence for “effective communication,” “meaningful reflection,” or even “regard for human solidarity and diversity”? Is a single assessment point at the senior year sufficient to assess student accomplishment in core courses spanning the entire undergraduate experience? Will faculty be willing to expand their current assessments of the majors to achieve this broader look at student achievement of college-wide goals? And even if all of these doubts can be addressed, will the resulting assessments lead to real changes and improvements in core courses?

Pitfalls are likewise obvious. We might present our ideas to the Assessment Planning Committee ineffectively, killing the project before it starts. Even with the APC on our side, that doesn’t win over departments that are struggling to establish their own practices in the major. The presentation of the idea needs broad under-

standing and support from the outset, as it proposes to allow mainly full-time, departmental faculty to comment on the effectiveness of courses not in their majors and often taught by part-time faculty. And finally, whose idea is it anyway? If I, as dean, “support” this approach too strongly, it will be seen as a top-down administrator’s project. The AAC&U imprimatur sometimes offers legitimacy, but is just as often seen as outside meddling in our internal processes. Regardless of the value of the idea, it can be sidetracked at many points along the way.

### PROGRESS REPORT: BACK TO REALITY

One of my fellow institute team members and I were in fact invited to report to the APC in October. The meeting went well, but our presentation may have been somewhat hampered by “wet dog syndrome.” We returned from a rich working conference in July, at which we and our colleagues developed what we thought was an elegant solution to a complex problem. Like the dog just returning from a dip in the lake on a hot summer day, we wanted to share our joy and enthusiasm. As anyone who has returned from a conference with the same exuberance knows, the effect on bystanders is often the same as that of the dog: the joy you wish to share is perhaps too sudden and widely distributed to be received well. At the same time, I have to say that the APC asked the same questions we asked of ourselves in our doubting moments. Is the department the best place for general education assessment to occur? It might be too narrow for more advanced departments, while too complex for those departments just beginning. Would core assessment through the major be focused enough? That is, will we learn enough about what is working in the core and what is not to make informed judgments for change? Do we not need multiple points of assessment throughout a student’s career,

including her work in the core? And first and foremost in the minds of the assessment committee was the question, Is this a good time? The core was still in flux at time of our initial presentation in mid-October. By October 27, our curriculum committee had (thankfully) passed a new core, albeit not without objection from several departments. We are now ready to move ahead in answering some of the more detailed questions of the new core, but the issue of how that new core is to be assessed remains. The decision was to receive our proposal, but to hold it until the spring, until members of the APC could complete their reviews of current departmental assessment practices.

### CONCLUSION

Assessment is above all a human process (says the dean of humanities). Any new process takes time and patience, and nowhere is this truer than in academe. While administrators, boards of trustees, and accreditors are our incentives, we tend to be (rightfully) skeptical of initiatives for their own sakes. If not a natural part of a department’s annual activities, outcomes assessment becomes meaningless data collection at best. As in art and athletics, some departments and institutions excel easily, while others come to assessment slowly. Or as Malvolio is advised, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust upon them.” The final effect on Malvolio in the play is left ambiguous: having been embarrassed by his erratic behavior, he is then imprisoned and abused for several days. He leaves the play with the threat he will be “revenged upon you all.” And yet in the tradition of the comedies, some interpreters hope that he returns later, humbled yet perhaps more wise about the fickle nature of human judgment. Having spent our four days in Philadelphia (as Malvolio spends four days in “a dark place”), we will put on our yellow stockings and go forward. ■

# Promoting Change: Moving Toward a Culture of Assessment

► **Paul B. Duff**, professor of religion and associate dean for undergraduate studies, The George Washington University

Like many other schools around the country, the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences at the George Washington University (GW) has recently turned its focus to the assessment of student learning, particularly assessment at the undergraduate level.

## ASSESSMENT EFFORTS IN THE COLUMBIAN COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES: ZERO TO SIXTY IN FIFTEEN MONTHS

The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences is the oldest and largest of the schools that comprise the George Washington University, a research institution. The college consists of more than forty departments, with forty-six undergraduate majors in the arts, humanities, mathematics, natural sciences, and social sciences. It also offers thirty-four master's programs, twenty-six combined bachelor's/master's programs, and twenty doctoral programs.

The focus on the assessment of student learning in the Columbian College has been motivated, at least in part, by recommendations from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in its 2008 accreditation report. In that report, the Middle States Commission recommended that the Columbian College implement “a comprehensive, organized, and sustained process for the assessment of student learning outcomes, including evidence that assessment results are used for improvement.”

While the college as a whole had not created or implemented any college-wide plan for the assessment of student learning, there were some individual units within the college that had been assessing student learning for some time. These units, in conjunction with the university's assessment office, provided valuable resources for the college as it moved forward.

To promote a culture of assessment in the Columbian College, an ad hoc college task force was created. Next, a number of significant faculty development strategies, aimed particularly at chairs and key college personnel, were implemented. The task force—comprised of faculty, staff, and college administrators—was appointed by the dean of the college at the beginning of fall semester 2008. Included in this group were several well-respected senior faculty members in the college, a few faculty members who had some knowledge and experience in assessment, some recently-tenured faculty, an associate dean of the college, and the chief assessment officer of the university.

The task force produced a report offering a clear and simple template to be used by departments to articulate their learning outcomes and assessment strategies. Also included was a timetable for implementation. The timetable was arguably the most important outcome, as it recommended that all course syllabi list learning outcomes by the beginning of the 2009 academic year, that all departments submit an assessment plan by October 15, 2009, and that departments begin the implementation of the plan by the end of the 2009–10 academic year.

The dean of the college recognized that the recommendations of the task force could not be effectively implemented without significant faculty development. By bringing local and national experts to the college and creating venues for discussion, we facilitated internal faculty development. In academic year 2008–09, one of the most important venues in the college for internal faculty development was the monthly department chairs and program directors meeting, at which assessment of student learning was repeatedly addressed. When assessment experts were brought to campus, we arranged separate meetings with the department chairs and these experts.



## EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Besides internal faculty development, the college took advantage of a number of external opportunities for faculty development. These included sending key college personnel, both faculty and administrators, to assessment meetings sponsored by organizations such as AAC&U and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Among the most helpful of these was the AAC&U Engaging Departments Institute in July 2009 at the University of Pennsylvania. A team of young department chairs and program directors from the Columbian College attended this institute and asked to carry away some strategies for piloting a modest but workable assessment plan in his or her unit. The team members were to present their progress on these plans to the chairs of the college at their fall retreat. We hoped that these team members would function both as a resource and an example for other chairs in the college.

As the mid-October deadline for assessment plans submission approached, the discussions about assessment intensified. However, the conversations, both public and private, changed markedly. They were no longer dominated by resistance, but instead turned toward the practical. Chairs began to ask “how” rather than “why.” They also began to ask for help in creating their assessment plans. Fortunately, the university’s chief assessment officer had hired a recently retired and well-respected faculty member for the specific purpose of assisting departments to create these plans. The respect that this individual commanded, her thorough understanding of the principles of assessment, and her dogged determination to reach out to as many departments as possible greatly assisted the college’s efforts to meet the October 15 deadline.

Although the effort to implement serious and sustainable assessment of student learning in the Columbian College

is by no means completed, the first major hurdle has been cleared. Plans for the assessment of the Columbian College’s more than one hundred programs have been gathered. In addition, many individual faculty members have complied with the task force’s recommendation to add learning outcomes at the beginning of their syllabi.

The broad strokes of this summary cannot do justice to the remarkable progress that the college has made in a little more than a year. The progress was certainly due, in large measure, to the determined leadership of the dean and the significant assistance of the university’s assessment office. However, it could not have happened without the thoughtful deliberation of key faculty members and chairs—including those who attended the Engaging Departments Institute—who realized not only the necessity of implementing assessment but also its potential value to the academic enterprise.

## THE ENGAGING DEPARTMENTS INSTITUTE

The Engaging Departments Institute offered a unique opportunity for faculty development by providing the GW team with the chance to bring together an important group of young faculty members to discuss specific ways to advance assessment throughout the college. The associate dean for undergraduate studies led the team, which included faculty members chosen from the rising generation of leadership in the college. Three of the team members were new or relatively new departmental chairs or program directors, including the chair of the geography department, the chair of the department of theater and dance, and the director of the first-year writing program. The fourth team member was the incoming deputy chair of the department of music, who will assume the role of chair in the 2010–11 academic year.

Each team member was charged with the task of outlining a programmatic assessment plan for his or her unit. In addition, the team as a whole was asked to consider ways to assess the general education curriculum of the college. Although this was not the team members’ primary task, they were prompted to keep general education in mind while thinking about their own programmatic assessment plans.

The team dedicated the first of its discussions to general education. Following the discussion of general education, its possibilities, and the assessment of it, the team shifted its focus to the individual disciplines represented. Examining the general education goals of the college first proved to be a valuable exercise because the discussion provided a backdrop against which to consider the curricula and the assessment of each team member’s individual program.

Each team member led a session focused on his or her academic unit. While the assessment of student learning played a major role in each of these discussions, conversation among the team inevitably moved beyond that topic. The understanding that any potentially sensitive details of these conversations were “off the record” generated an atmosphere of trust within the team. This atmosphere enabled each team member to lay out candidly both the challenges facing him or her and aspirations for change. While one person led the discussion, the rest of the team participated by asking questions and making suggestions—in short, by helping the leader brainstorm.

As might be expected, each team member articulated challenges unique to his or her discipline or situation at the university. For example, a major assessment challenge facing both of the departments in the arts is the issue of subjectivity. Assessing musical or dance performance is one thing, but how does one assess student creativity in choreography, composition, or



design? In addition, thoughtful questions were raised about the potential negative consequences that significant assessment might have on an academic unit in the arts.

The challenges faced by the university writing program, although quite different, are no less significant. Particularly noteworthy for that program is the multiplicity of audiences that any assessment of student writing at GW must address. These included the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the GW administration, the university writing faculty, and the field of composition theory. The dilemma is, of course, how the program should focus its assessment, given the conflicting needs of its audiences.

Although unique concerns were expressed by each team member, one common concern emerged: the issue of breadth within some academic fields. The geography department, for instance, includes faculty in both physical geography (natural science) and human geography (social science), and it expects its majors to attain proficiency across these diverse disciplines. That same department also contains the environmental studies program.

The broad expanse of the discipline is also a factor in both the department of music and the department of theater and dance. The music department covers the history of music, theory and composition, and performance; competence in each of these areas is expected of all students. In the department of theater and dance, students of dance are expected to attain competence in choreography, dance, and dance history, while students of theater need to gain competence in acting, production, and the history of the theater. The breadth of each of these departments poses significant challenges for the effective and sustained assessment of student learning.

But the breadth of these departments also raises concerns only tangentially

related to the assessment of student learning. For instance, one important challenge the chairs of such departments face is the “factionalization” of the faculty or the isolation of faculty members from one another. This fragmentation is inevitably exacerbated by the teaching specializations of the faculty. Faculty research can further erode departmental coherence, with faculty in one department attending differently focused conferences and publishing in the journals of their specialization. In departments such as these, motivating faculty to look at the bigger picture and to actively consider the goals of the department or program (rather than one’s specialized teaching or research agenda) can be challenging.

However, while the number of challenges articulated above may give the impression that these issues dominated the conversations, the team spent most of its time problem solving. The conversation about assessment in each of the team’s discussions usually began with the question, “How can we assess student learning in this program?” but then shifted to “How can we use assessment as a tool to facilitate positive programmatic change?”

The members of the team thought about using program assessment as a strategy for positive change in a number of different ways. For instance, a team member suggested that the effective assessment of student learning could be used as an evidence-based argument for curricular change. Alternatively, another team member suggested that assessment could be used to articulate a department’s strengths to the university or even to outside constituencies. As everyone knows, it is difficult for academic units to attract resources. However, *documented* success is a powerful tool of persuasion.

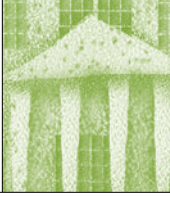
There was significant discussion about the possibility of using assessment as a

tool to encourage a sense of a shared mission within the kind of broadly focused department mentioned above. While faculty may diverge in research interests or teaching expertise, they all share a common cohort of students. The assessment of student learning inevitably raises the issue of a department’s mission and can help a department work as a unit. In short, by the end of the institute, because of their frank and thoughtful discussions, the team members recognized the potential that the assessment of student learning had for renewing and empowering their own academic units.

## CONCLUSION

While attending the Engaging Departments Institute did not provide a magic solution to the assessment challenges faced by the Columbian College, our participation nevertheless played an important role in the implementation of a culture of assessment in the college. Although only four of the almost fifty department chairs or program directors took part in the institute, the young leaders who did attend brought back important insights to the college and their individual units. Perhaps more important, the kind of interactions that occurred among the members of the Columbian College team should serve as an example for the kinds of productive discussions that can take place among other college leaders on our campus and elsewhere.

Therefore, the Engaging Departments Institute was central to the advances made by the GW team in understanding and promoting assessment in the Columbian College. It provided both professional guidance about assessment, an opportunity to interact closely with colleagues from different disciplines, and a safe space away from campus to foster discussion about a topic crucial to effective education but also often misunderstood. ■



# Assessment Culture: From Ideal to Real—A Process of Tinkering

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**A**s a state university, California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) is experiencing a time of great stress, uncertainty, and fear. Budget cuts, furloughs, and the challenges inherent in educating increasing numbers of students during a time of shrinking resources are all at the forefront of the minds of our staff and faculty. Nonetheless, accreditation pressures, program reviews, and annual assessment plans are still realities and expectations. In its fifteen-year history, CSUMB has taken an outcomes-based approach to building its curriculum. Every requirement, course, and degree has carefully articulated student learning outcomes, and mechanisms have been built in to assure sustained conversations about those outcomes. A recent self-study, conducted as part of the campus' first reaccreditation, revealed, however, that the faculty have not moved as intentionally from outcomes to assessment of those outcomes. Perhaps "closing the loop" has not happened because the demands of institution building have diverted the necessary time and attention. The critical step of achieving closure will require building a culture of assessment on campus. Ideally this culture will be steeped in an understanding and appreciation of how systematic assessment can inform what and how we teach, so that deep and meaningful student learning is more likely to occur. Building such a culture with its attendant practices and perspectives has become the centerpiece of program reviews and preparation for reaccreditation.

In terms of context, it is also important to realize that as a campus, we have been engaged in an ambitious general education revision, that is framed by AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) essential learning outcomes, and is intended to bring coherence to the entire undergraduate curriculum, one of our

academic priorities. Thus, the invitation to apply for the Engaging Departments Institute was perfectly timed. As we discovered once we arrived, three other academic priorities are extremely well served by the conversations, workshops, and presentations at the institute, namely, operating in a culture of evidence, enhancing active and engaged learning, and enhancing technology.

## IMPACTS AT THE ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL

Upon our return from the institute, we participated in a meeting of the Deans and Provost Council dedicated to reviewing departmental plans for assessment of learning in the majors. That meeting was a perfect opportunity to begin connecting those plans to the larger goal of curricular coherence that had become central to all of us during the institute. At that gathering, we shared the following insights:

- First, we must consider the potential of the LEAP outcomes to contribute to curricular coherence. Our campus has used LEAP to develop models for redesign of our general education curriculum over the past academic year and will be adopting a new model and beginning implementation in the coming year. Using that same LEAP structure to reexamine learning outcomes in our majors is a goal we all have come to share.
- Second, while all of our academic programs include capstones and we appreciate these courses as important sites for assessing student learning, we also must be more attentive to identifying milestones and helping students recognize and assess their learning at those milestones, as well as understand how they contribute to overall learning.



- Third, we see e-portfolios as powerful learning tools to provide coherence and to support our students and ourselves in the teaching and learning process.
- Finally, the evidence that is available to us through electronic portfolios, capstone courses, interaction with our students and faculty, and myriad other sites, must be thoughtfully analyzed and used to inform ongoing improvement of the learning opportunities we provide to our students.

The guidelines (fig. 1) have now been shared with all academic departments and have been used by them to revise their assessment plans for 2009–10. Departments have gained some insight into how to use their scholarly and creative training to design meaningful, sustained, and systematic assessment of student learning that is analyzed and mobilized to enhance curriculum and pedagogy. Although implementing these plans will require continued nurturing and support, faculty have expressed interest in revisiting the structure of our upper-division curriculum that will provide us with opportunities to frame campus conversations around LEAP, e-portfolios, milestones, and evidence-based decisions about teaching and learning.

### IMPACTS AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL: THE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Attending the institute came at an opportune time for the CSUMB School of Business (BUS) representatives. Over the preceding year, we had completed three major steps in our program review process: submitting our self-assessment study, receiving the external reviewers' report, and receiving the university's academic program review committee's report. What we learned at the institute helped us define a clear path to program assessment and improvement, and helped us align our thinking about program improvement with that of assessment professionals from across the nation.

One major "aha" moment we experienced at the institute came when we

realized that CSUMB students do not experience the curriculum as two separate parts: lower-division general education requirements and upper-division major learning requirements. Only administrators and faculty members view it this way. As a result of this realization, we established the goal of integrating the lower and upper divisions into a continuum of study for CSUMB BUS students—a step we also viewed as essential to better equipping our students for jobs in the twenty-first century. We returned to CSUMB with this new insight as a foundation piece for our program-improvement plan, and as a validation of the strategic decision we had made to align with AACSB accreditation standards.

Our second "aha" moment came when we were inspired to map our major learning outcomes (MLOs) and general knowledge and skills outcomes with the learning outcomes espoused by AAC&U through LEAP (AAC&U 2007). The result was a two-dimensional, both functional and knowledge-based, outcome structure. Figure 2, below, shows how we "nested" our outcomes within the larger LEAP framework to meet our goal of seamless integration of lower- and upper-division curricula.

Thanks to our learning at the institute, the program assessment and improvement

activities we have undertaken since returning to campus have been more data-driven than we had practiced in prior semesters. Our first area of assessment is oral and written communications, an outcome that cuts across both lower- and upper-division segments of the school of business curriculum. During fall planning week, the full-time faculty team crafted a research question designed to help us understand why students are unprepared to meet the professional writing standards of the senior capstone and, beyond the capstone level, of future employers (a finding affirmed by our own and published research). It quickly became apparent that we, as full-time faculty, did not have common standards. This helped galvanize our commitment to seek more evidence regarding writing instruction in the school of business. We are now assessing our writing outcomes by employing two pertinent concepts we learned at the institute: (1) designating milestone assignments for assessment within milestone courses; and (2) collecting both direct and indirect evidence to help us navigate the path to improved student learning.

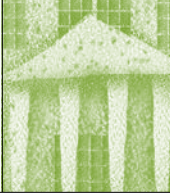
Additionally, we have used a questionnaire to gather indirect evidence from students taking the business graduate writing assessment requirement course and

#### FIGURE 1. ASSESSMENT PLAN 2009-2010

1. What is the critical concern/question held by the department regarding student learning that will be assessed during 2009-2010?
2. How is the critical concern/question related to the department's latest program review and program improvement plan?
3. Describe how/whether/when this critical concern has been previously assessed by your department. How will this new assessment build on the previous one(s)? How will this new critical concern/question generate new information for you?
4. In what specific activities will the department engage in 2009–2010 to determine which evidence will best align with the critical concern listed above?
5. How/when will the department gather evidence of student work? Who will be involved in this process? How will you assure that the evidence gathered is a random sample of student work?

*Selected guidelines for departmental plans for assessment of learning in the majors from the 2009–2010 Assessment Plan (as adapted by Renee Curry, Dean, CSUMB College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences).*





we have asked the instructors to introduce a short writing assignment to gauge the writing proficiency of students entering this course. We are using department faculty meetings to assess randomly selected pieces of student work against the rubric used by instructors in the course. Some early insights of this “norming” process are that: (1) the rubrics need to be modified because they do not capture all elements of writing students should be mastering; (2) not all faculty members are facile in applying rubrics—it takes time; (3) we don’t yet have a single set of standards; and (4) writing mechanics in the evidence collected are consistently below our expectations.

Since our inception, CSUMB and the School of Business have committed to out-

comes-based learning. Our challenge has been to embed a process that empowers us to assess student learning outcomes across our program—information not provided by course grades. We view our achievements as glimmers of reality that curriculum assessment and improvement can take place even within the context of these macro challenges we cannot control.

**IMPACTS AT THE DEPARTMENTAL LEVEL: LIBERAL STUDIES DEPARTMENT**

Attending the AAC&U Engaging Departments Institute provided opportunities to actively participate in workshops led by experts on teaching, learning, and assessment; debrief with teammates; and

use the allotted time to wrestle with new insights, tools, and strategies in the context of our department. Such opportunities were especially important to a team crafting a program-improvement plan based on the recently completed program review. A prominent question before us was how and what kind of assessment data should be collected, so as to profitably inform instruction and document the extent to which learning outcomes are achieved. The self-study done for the program review revealed that for the three MLOs under consideration, faculty tended to develop grading rubrics for their courses that primarily addressed course, rather than program, learning outcomes. There was also no coordination across courses within the major, and in the

**FIGURE 2. ALIGNMENT OF CSUMB BUS OUTCOMES WITH LEAP ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES.**

LEAP ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES	SCHOOL OF BUSINESS GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OUTCOMES	SCHOOL OF BUSINESS MAJOR/ MANAGEMENT SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE OUTCOMES
Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World		
Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts [and the professions]	General education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Leadership and management</li> <li>▪ Marketing</li> <li>▪ Finance</li> <li>▪ Information technology</li> <li>▪ Operations management</li> <li>▪ Entrepreneurship</li> </ul>
Intellectual and Practical Skills		
Inquiry and analysis	Apply critical thinking and analysis (quantitative and qualitative decision making)	
Critical and creative thinking	Apply critical thinking and analysis (quantitative and qualitative decision making)	
Written and oral communication	Demonstrate professional written and oral communication	
Quantitative literacy	Apply critical thinking and analysis (quantitative and qualitative decision making)	
Information literacy	Demonstrate technical competence	
Teamwork and problem solving	Function effectively in cross-functional teams	
Personal and Social Responsibility		
Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global	Demonstrate understanding of the implications of globalization and cultural diversity	
Intercultural knowledge and competence	Demonstrate understanding of the implications of globalization and cultural diversity	
Ethical reasoning and action	Demonstrate ethical and socially responsible reasoning and action	
Foundations and skills for lifelong learning	All of the above	
Integrative and Applied Learning		
Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies	All of the above	All of the above MLOs



instance of the capstone class, there were even differences in the nature of assignments among instructors. Hence, with respect to the MLOs, it was difficult to effectively map where particular outcomes were introduced, practiced, and assessed—let alone ensure that what constitutes practice of a learning outcome in one course is paralleled in another. Additionally, as emphasized by the external reviewers, it was important for the department to develop and/or identify milestone assignments that served as consistent evidence across required liberal studies courses of student learning.

The exposure to three tools—the VALUE rubrics, e-portfolios, and Bloom’s Taxonomy—during the Engaging Departments Institute prompted our “aha” moments because the tools afforded us concrete strategies that could be used to achieve goals at both the department and university levels.

Upon returning to campus, the challenge for the liberal studies team has been determining how to achieve buy-in amongst our colleagues. Obviously, adding these tools to existing departmental practices requires learning new skills and modifying courses to accommodate the use of those tools. Convincing colleagues that this is a worthwhile endeavor during a time of furloughs when we are already doing more with less is no easy feat. Our response is to begin leading by example. In the fall, two of the authors will teach sections of the major proseminar. This will provide a perfect opportunity to begin infusing these tools into existing departmental practices.

Finally, we, as a faculty, and our external reviewers have asked, “Why are our students entering the senior capstone unable to develop big ideas, address complex questions and provide complex responses to the thematic focus (multiculturalism and social justice) in an analytical manner?” Thus, our immediate focus is on the development of critical thinking skills. We plan to use the “practical strategies for

gathering ‘actionable’ evidence of student learning at the department level” introduced by Jo Beld at the AAC&U Institute.

In sum, the three tools mentioned are examples of how the participating liberal studies faculty were inspired to expand our assessment practices in ways that will nurture the type of teaching and learning that we would like to characterize our department as we enter the continuous cycle of improvement. We look forward to inspiring our departmental colleagues to join us on this journey.

### ASSESSMENT CULTURE: FROM IDEAL TO REAL...A PROCESS OF TINKERING

What conditions seem to be in place that will help this culture to take root? First, clearly the administration at CSUMB is establishing structures that will promote the growth of an assessment culture.

Examples include the need to conduct program reviews on a seven-year cycle and the expectation that departments will develop annual assessment plans that “close the loop” using the results from meaningful, sustained, and systematic assessment to inform curriculum and pedagogy. These results should in turn lead to more effective practices. Obviously, these efforts require faculty to devote time and energy to assessment activities. With appropriate support and guidance, these activities should facilitate the development of a more utopian assessment culture. Thus, these mandates are supported by on-campus workshops that provide a means for developing effective assessment practices.

Second, the institution is willing to invest resources to establish a context that will support and nurture desired practices and perspectives. Considerable resources are being devoted to the important task of building curricular coherence to develop an environment that promotes deep and meaningful learning. Moreover, the financial resources used to send this team to the

institute have afforded the development of not only faculty expertise, but perhaps just as important, positive faculty dispositions toward the importance of a robust culture of assessment. It is expected that through our practices and leadership, participating faculty can begin spreading what we have learned from the institute to our departmental colleagues, who in turn will also begin to serve as sources of inspiration and expertise for their peers across campus.

A third factor that will help build a culture of assessment on campus is, as stated earlier, a senior leadership group committed to guiding principles that allow us to plan and implement assessment and improvements with realistic targets. These principles include the following: (1) assessment is not episodic, but continuous; (2) initiatives for change can be done in small steps; and (3) time horizons and plan achievements are governed by available resources.

By and large, we are finding faculty and administrators quite responsive to what we are introducing. We anticipate that campuswide discussions will come when, as we have said, the general education model is in place and we can pursue the next obvious step—tying together the upper and lower divisions through coherent outcomes. By that time, business and liberal studies will be able to guide the discussion, sharing what they’ve been doing and learning. ■

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# Pulling It All Together: Connecting Liberal Arts Outcomes with Departmental Goals through General Education

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When our team arrived at AAC&U's 2009 Engaging Departments Institute in Philadelphia, we wanted to work on a plan to both broaden and deepen our students' knowledge of the liberal arts, and in doing so address issues relating to retention, graduation, and assessment as collateral benefits. We had already spent some years working on a number of parallel projects—a spectrum of general education core competencies; a means for students and faculty to assess the coverage of those core competencies; a set of general education rubrics; the design of an e-portfolio philosophy; the criteria for capstone courses—so what we were really interested in was a way to link everything together. We also knew that to create a viable plan we would have to collaborate with a variety of researchers and build on the contributions of others. The solution we came up with at the institute was a plan for the renovation of our liberal arts curriculum.

Eugenio María de Hostos Community College is an unusual place. It is simultaneously situated in one of the nation's most

economically disadvantaged congressional districts, but it is also located in one of the world's great cities. We like to call ourselves a small college, but with some 6,000 students, we are actually a large institution. We like to consider ourselves a typical community college, but we are not. Unlike most community colleges, our students are automatically enrolled in one of the world's major research universities, and faculty members with the rank of assistant professor or higher are not only required to hold PhDs, but also have a contractual responsibility to maintain an active interest in research and publication for the purposes of reappointment, tenure, and promotion.

By definition, the community college offers fewer opportunities for students to naturally draw a cohesiveness from their courses—they have, through no fault of their own, not enough credit hours to finish the process of learning how to “confront different perspectives and integrate insights” (Newell 1999, 18). Under the circumstances of a community college program of studies based on a sometimes



arbitrarily rigid set of developmental and general education curriculum, proponents of integrative learning face two challenges: one, the assumption that students do not have a broad enough multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary knowledge base from which to work toward developing “the habit of integration” (Newell 1999, 18); and two, the assumption that students do not have enough time to gradually build community, to be able to encounter different forms of campus and noncampus discourse.

At Hostos, we were well aware of these underlying issues, and the question merely became one of what to do about them. The key, we felt, was to comprehensively integrate our overall general education core competencies across the curriculum, through each department, and build into our methodology not only high-impact practices designed to capture our students’ imaginations, but to provide a means by which we can assess what we do. As it turned out, the most challenging aspect of this ambition was not the development of all of the constituent elements, but carefully thinking through the implications of their interactions.

Fortunately, the most critical of these elements, our general education movement, had been in place for some time. Characterized by the grassroots involvement of a large number of faculty and staff, our general education standards, procedures, brochures, and initiatives have been approved by the collegewide chairs and coordinators, the Center for Teaching and Learning’s Advisory Council, department faculty, the collegewide curriculum committee and the collegewide senate. We ended up with a set of general education core competencies designed to address the specific needs of our student population.

At the same time we were working on our core competencies, we heard about the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, from Judy Patton, associate dean of fine and performing arts at Portland State University, and a guest speaker at Hostos. Her leadership helped us corral an overarching vision within which the core competencies could be delivered by faculty to our students.

After formalizing the core competencies, the general education committee followed

Patton’s advice when she warned against assuming that important skills are being taught. Patton explained that it was critical for an institution to show proof that skills are being taught and learned across the curriculum. She cautioned us that when everyone thinks someone else is doing something, there is danger of no one doing it at all. To help us assess whether skills were actually being taught, we designed the general education mapping tool, an online application that could be easily used by both faculty and students. Developed over the course of a semester, the resulting application measures course-level exposure to basic and advanced core competencies. Faculty and students indicate the types and frequency of assignments presented in each course. The mapping tool records the faculty and student views of which competencies are being stressed, and faculty members are able to see their students’ results only after they themselves complete the same process for each of their courses.

The mapping tool features built-in data analyses and generates comparative reports at the course, unit, department, and collegewide level. The resulting data allow for comparisons between faculty and student perceptions of the frequency of occurrence of the general education competencies and associated assignments and pedagogies. Course-level aggregated data of student perception provide feedback to faculty, who can put the data to use immediately in clarifying student learning outcomes for their courses. Further, the data permit analyses at various levels of aggregations, from course to unit to department to collegewide, which provides invaluable data at the departmental level to support the academic program review process.

The college is now working with the resultant data to determine how the findings can be aligned more efficiently to tell a more complete story of the teaching and learning at the various levels of aggregation. While not specifically related to Standard 14





(the assessment of student learning) from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education—our accreditation agency—our work in this area is clearly related to the assessment of student learning outcomes as they pertain to the general education competencies determined by and for the college.

The next phase of our general education mission has been the development of rubrics to assess the degree to which students demonstrate mastery of the general education competencies. Using the initial rubrics and development process established by the AAC&U VALUE initiative, the General Education Committee implemented a similar, small-scale project to develop rubrics for each of the Hostos-identified general education core competencies. The general education committee appointed a rubric leader for each Hostos rubric team. We received an overwhelming response to the call for volunteers. More than twenty full-time faculty set out to design four rubrics. The resulting seven rubrics, which will ultimately become eight rubrics, are now in use around the college.

Concurrent with the development of the general education core competencies, online mapping tool, and general education rubrics, we have been slowly introducing various e-portfolio pilot projects. In 2006, the Center for Teaching and Learning, through the college's Title V grant, provided funding to two professors to research the implementation of e-portfolios at the college. The resulting white paper has driven all subsequent e-portfolio development.

By linking students' self-assessment and teachers' evaluations to the overarching goals of general education at their institution through e-portfolios, we hoped that student learning as well as faculty instruction would be enhanced, since these goals typically include skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and the development of global perspectives, to name just a few. In addition, linking electronic portfolio assessment to general

education objectives provides accreditation bodies with electronic portfolios to use in their analysis of institutional effectiveness in meeting the goals Hostos had set for itself, as well as statewide standards. Using the rubrics, artifacts stored in student e-portfolios will be assessed on the degree to which they meet the competency. The resulting data will be analyzed in conjunction with the results from the mapping tool to provide faculty and administration with a clear understanding of how well the general education competencies are being met. Using that information, appropriate actions will be taken to further ensure that the general education competencies are infused throughout the curriculum.

The penultimate piece of the puzzle is the ongoing development of freshman foundation and sophomore capstone courses. The design of these courses was influenced by AAC&U's 2008 publication on high-impact practices, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Initially, these practices found their way into our recently revised honors curriculum. In summer 2009, a task force of the honors committee worked to create a new model for the honors section, and determined that such courses would have to adopt at least two high-impact practices, and address three level-two core competencies. Similarly, we built assessment into the model, and called for carefully indexing specific learning objectives with assignments, planning in advance for ways to evaluate student mastery of general education goals. In addition, the task force decided that all honors students would maintain e-portfolios to track their progress.

In order to complete the final task of linking the general education core competencies, the mapping tool, general education rubrics, e-portfolios, and foundation and capstone courses together to form a more rewarding and transparent education for our students, we brought our team of senior

professors and members of the administration to the Engaging Departments Institute to formulate a plan. We constructed four models for finalizing the integration of general education into our curriculum—beyond a basic distribution model—and then charged the faculty with completion of the job. Representatives and alternates from each department were appointed to a task force and are busy weighing the merits of each model. In the closing weeks of 2009, task force members brought their departments up to date and by spring 2010, the completed package should be ready to bring before college and ultimately university governance.

Although we still have much work to do, we can make two major observations about general education reform. First, the sophistication and interrelated nature of the task makes it impossible for a college to develop an entirely homegrown approach to the successful integration of general education into an undergraduate curriculum. We will also draw upon the experiences of colleagues at distant institutions, upon published research, and upon the resources of groups such as AAC&U. Second, broad faculty participation is crucial for the venture to succeed. At Hostos, we were fortunate that so many faculty were interested in participating in committee work, completing the mapping tool, and piloting rubrics in their classes. In the end, nearly half of our faculty have served in one or more ways on the various committees and task forces responsible for our approach to general education. ■

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# Highlights of AAC&U Work on Assessing Student Learning

## Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)

Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) is an initiative that champions the value of a liberal education—for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. LEAP focuses campus practice on fostering essential learning outcomes for all students, whatever their chosen field of study. The initiative is AAC&U's primary vehicle for advancing and communicating about the importance of undergraduate liberal education for all students. LEAP seeks to engage the public with core questions about what really matters in college, to give students a compass to guide their learning, and to make a set of essential learning outcomes the preferred framework for educational excellence, assessment of learning, and new alignments between school and college.

## Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education: VALUE

As institutions are asked to document the quality of student learning and to raise retention and graduation rates, the VALUE project has helped them to define, document, assess, and strengthen student achievement of the essential learning outcomes that stand at the center of AAC&U's LEAP initiative. Recognizing that there are no standardized tests for many of the essential outcomes of an undergraduate education, the VALUE project has developed ways for students and institutions to collect convincing evidence of student learning drawn primarily from the work students complete through their required curriculum, assessed by well-developed campus rubrics and judgments of selected experts, and demonstrated through electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) that can be organized and presented in ways appropriate for different audiences

## Meetings

### General Education and Assessment 3.0: Next-Level Practices Now

March 3–5, 2011, Chicago, Illinois

In 2011, this yearly conference will focus on innovative and purposeful approaches to general education and assessment especially in the context of external pressures to reduce time to degree. Even in challenging financial times, colleges and universities must continue to help students develop the kind of innovative, “big-picture” thinking and creative problem-solving skills that excellent general education programs foster. This conference provides participants a community of practice for educators at colleges and universities of all sizes and types to explore “next-level” models and practices that strengthen student achievement of essential learning outcomes. For more information, see [www.aacu.org/meetings/networkforacademicrenewal.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/meetings/networkforacademicrenewal.cfm)

### Institute on General Education and Assessment

AAC&U's annual Institute on General Education and Assessment is an opportunity for campus teams to come together to work with consultants and each other on reforming their general education programs. The institute creates a varied, intellectually stimulating environment for advancing campus planning in general education for two- and four-year, liberal arts, comprehensive, research, and public or private campuses. The institute is comprised of interactive presentations by experienced faculty who have been engaged in general education learning

### Greater Expectations Institute

The Greater Expectations Institute is specifically designed for campuses working to build their institutional capacity and leadership to increase the inclusion, engagement, and high achievement of all their students. The institute will help campus teams align institutional purposes, structures, and practices as well as advance and assess learning outcomes that are essential for success in today's world. These outcomes include such things as critical inquiry, communication skills, social responsibility, intercultural competence, and integrative learning. The institute emphasizes active participation that fosters open communication within and across teams and with institute faculty members who are nationally recognized scholars and practitioners



# Assessing General Education Competencies within Academic Disciplines

► **Michael F. Middaugh**, associate provost for institutional effectiveness, University of Delaware and chair, Middle States Commission on Higher Education

**W**hen approaching assessment of student learning outcomes, colleges and universities would be well-served to look beyond the all-too familiar silos for measuring student learning (i.e., course assessments, program assessments, and assessment of general education). Regional accrediting bodies expect institutions to take an integrative approach to measuring student learning. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education explicitly requires that institutions demonstrate “clearly articulated statements of expected student learning outcomes at all levels (institution, degree/program, course)...” (2006). How is this articulation and integration best accomplished?

In my view, the critical juncture in achieving this integration of learning outcomes is the development of credible, measurable learning outcomes at the program level. What are the specific, demonstrable competencies that are expected of all graduating biology majors at my institution? Of all sociology majors? Of all English majors? Of all physics majors? Once those competencies are defined, it is then much easier to identify learning outcomes at the course level that will contribute to the acquisition of those summative programmatic competencies. Linking course outcomes to overarching disciplinary outcomes is not complicated,

as the focus is on competencies related to the specific discipline. The more challenging linkage is articulating program and discipline to “umbrella” institutional competencies that are expected of all graduates, regardless of discipline. These are typically general education skills such as critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, oral and written communication and information literacy.

While many institutions use standardized tests directed at measuring general education to assess competencies in samples of students from across the disciplines, that approach does not suit assessment of general education skills within the disciplines. A common approach to the latter is one in which a representative sample of students from a given program are asked to submit three samples of written work, two from senior-level courses within the discipline and one from outside the discipline. Those work samples are then evaluated by a faculty panel using an appropriately constructed set of rubrics designed to assess mastery of general education skills. Construction of such rubrics is not a daunting task. The Association of American Colleges and Universities has created just such rubrics with its Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) Project. They lend themselves particularly well to measuring general

education skills within portfolios of work in a given discipline, and more than satisfy the required articulation between program and institutional learning outcomes required by accrediting bodies. Perhaps more valuable is the fact that this approach to assessing general education within the disciplines prompts faculty into thoughtful dialogue about what it is they teach within the discipline and how that content ties to broader competencies that characterize successful college graduates. Therein lies the key to improving the teaching/learning process.

The true value of the assessment process lies in “closing the loop.” While it is important to measure student learning at various points in students’ academic careers, those measurements have value only when faculty examine them in thoughtful ways and use them as the basis for collegial discussions on how the teaching/learning process can be improved both within the discipline and at the broad institutional level. This loop-closing conversation is the key to compliance with accreditation standards that address the assessment process. ■

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Middle States Commission on Higher Education. 2006. *Characteristics of excellence: Eligibility requirements and standards for accreditation*. Philadelphia, PA: Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.



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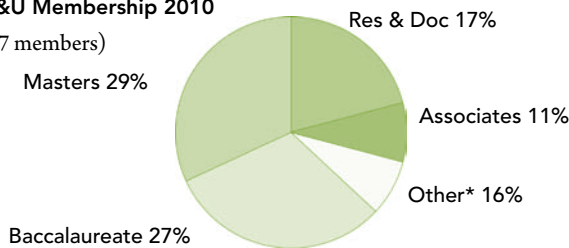
AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises 1,200 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.

AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org).

### AAC&U Membership 2010

(1,227 members)



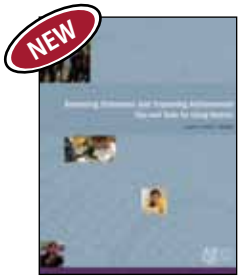
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## VALUE PUBLICATIONS

### Assessing Outcomes and Improving Achievement: Tips and Tools for Using Rubrics

Edited by Terrel R. Rhodes

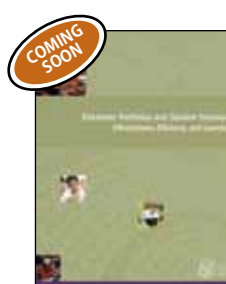


This publication provides practical advice on the development and effective use of rubrics to evaluate college student achievement at various levels. Also included are the rubrics developed by faculty teams for fifteen liberal learning outcomes through AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project. These VALUE rubrics can be readily adapted to reflect the missions, cultures, and practices of individual colleges and universities and their specific programs.

\$15/\$25/VALRUBRIC

### Electronic Portfolios and Student Success: Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Learning

By Helen L. Chen and Tracy Penny Light



This publication presents an overview of electronic portfolios and how individuals and campuses can organize to explore the development and implementation of e-portfolios for enhanced student learning. The manuscript is organized around eight issues that are central to implementing an e-portfolio approach. The focus on electronic student portfolios recognizes that learning occurs in many places, takes many forms, and is exhibited through many modes of representation. The eight issues are illustrated through a case study of a single course and through multiple campus examples.