

Conversations: Assessment @ BU

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2007-2008 Assessment Activities Report and 2008-2009 Strategic Plan Available on Website

As is our practice, the 2007-2008 activities report is available on the assessment website, <http://assessment.binghamton.edu>. Overall, the report demonstrates that departments and programs continue to make progress with regard to specifying student learning outcomes, assessing these outcomes, discussing strengths and weaknesses as revealed by the assessments, and acting on these findings on a regular basis.

The 2008-2009 strategic plan continues to emphasize specifying student learning—especially at course and program levels. During the coming academic year, workshops will focus on specifying such outcomes and on assessing students learning in undergraduate and graduate study.

Student Learning Outcomes Document Distributed to Faculty

The Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment has developed a document for faculty entitled “Student Learning Report,” which is intended to assist faculty as they write their syllabi and design lessons plans for the Fall and Spring semesters. The specific purpose of the document is to inform faculty about what recent student learning assessments have concluded about strengths and weaknesses in student learning and to encourage faculty to build upon strengths and address weaknesses in student learning as they teach their students. On the third page of the document, faculty who read the report are encouraged to:

- ◆ Review the student learning assessment information found in the report and identify student learning outcomes that their courses address.
- ◆ Review strengths and weaknesses as revealed through various assessments

discussed in the report.

- ◆ Think about ways to address strengths and weaknesses in the courses they teach.
- ◆ Implement strategies—through lesson planning, classroom assessment techniques, lectures, presentations, etc.—that address these strengths and weaknesses.
- ◆ Share these experiences with colleagues.

The report presents assessment findings (many of which are from Assessment Category Teams and faculty-based rubric assessments) but also makes suggestions, on the bottom of each page, for further enhancing student performance in each student learning area of the report. On the last page of the report, interested faculty can also find resources available to them as they research meaningful ways to teach their students.

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Assessment Tip: Interdisciplinary Programs

Interdisciplinary programs often include courses from several departments, many of which differ with regard to requirements, focus, and content. With regard to the assessment of student learning, the primary challenge has to do with “control”: interdisciplinary programs must often wonder how to assess student learning when many of the courses are not taught within one department.

Last year, we held discussions with several interdisciplinary programs, reviewed assessment plans of these programs, and researched assessment of these programs at other colleges and universities. To no one’s surprise, the consensus is that assessment of interdisciplinary programs is both (initially) challenging and rewarding. Some suggestions:

- ◆ Instead of focusing on the knowledge students should acquire (since courses that disseminate this knowledge are often in differing departments), focus on skills and competencies (also known as “habits of mind”). With program faculty, decide what behaviors or world views you would like students to develop and which things you would like your students to do particularly well.
- ◆ Think of some courses that your students take at the end of their program and ascertain if there are similar assignments they complete that address these skills and competencies. Ask the faculty teaching these courses to assemble (every year or every two years) after grading these assignments to discuss students’ strengths and weaknesses with regard to these skills and competencies. Then, make a list of actions and recommendations and endeavor to act on these over a two-year period.
- ◆ Start small. If you are able to identify alumni, conduct an alumni survey; even better, see if you can track employment and/or enrollment in graduate programs. Create open-ended or closed-ended faculty and senior student surveys to see how well students are acquiring key skills and competencies.

As always, work with the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment to “start small” and begin the assessment process. Interdisciplinary programs have a lot to offer to students wanting to take a diverse number of courses, and meaningful, yet focused, assessments can very much produce information for the management of student learning.

Using Assessment in Grant Applications

The Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment has endeavored to assist in the grant application process, especially with regard to grants that require some form of assessment of program and/or grant effectiveness, which is common in NSF, NIH, and other grant agencies. Some examples of some ways we have assisted in the past:

- ◆ Research on survey questions or survey instruments that might be used to assess the impact of grants on individuals gaining instruction as a result of the grant;
- ◆ Letters indicating the support of the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment in the assessment process; and
- ◆ Training and implementation of focus groups.

Those desiring assistance should contact Sean McKittrick at smckitri@binghamton.edu.

“The worth of a book is to be measured by what you can carry away from it .”

James Bryce

Using Assessment Results in Curriculum & Teaching

Use of assessment results is vital to the assessment process. The collection of assessment information is merely that—collection. Most accrediting organizations, as well as those who are national experts on assessments, teach that assessment just for the sake of data collection is really an exercise in futility because failing to discuss assessment information and its “lesson learned” misses the point of assessment in the first place. The real “point” of assessment is to use multiple measures of student learning so that faculty can discuss strengths and weaknesses in student learning and do something about what they discover.

Some ways to use assessment results:

- ◆ Make sure assessments and discussions about what assessments have to say about student learning focus primarily on department or program student learning outcomes. For example, if one of a program’s student learning outcomes states, “By graduation, a student will be able to compare and contrast different schools of thought in solving present-day problems and

issues in X,” then first identify an assessment (or series of assessments) that help faculty understand strengths and weaknesses in these areas; second, discuss what those assessments have to say.

- ◆ Ask which courses address the student learning outcome, and then (if there is agreement about this) what strengths and weaknesses are revealed by the assessment. Discuss these strengths and weaknesses with faculty teaching these courses and brainstorm about ways to enhance student learning.
- ◆ Occasionally (every few years or so), ask if these assessments seem to indicate that program curriculum might need to change in order to enhance student learning. Most fields stay current because they at least indirectly assess the status of their field and whether or not courses could change to reflect changes in discipline trends.
- ◆ Every now and then, ask faculty to

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“...the true measure of learning is in its application - show me what you can do - how have you assimilated the learning, made it your own and then applied it in the completion of one or more related tasks or activities - it's about competencies.”

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General Education Portfolio Assessments Begin

During the Fall 2008 semester, assessment category teams (ACTs) will meet to review course portfolios and other assessment information relevant to the areas of Composition, Oral Communication, Pluralism, and Global Interdependencies.

Each ACT is tasked with reviewing course portfolios as their primary source of information. Randomly selected instructors submit a syllabus; samples of student work; an estimate of the number of students in their course who exceed, meet, approach, and do not meet expectations; a narrative statement about how they feel their course addressed the student learning outcomes for the General Education category; and a narrative statement about the strengths and weaknesses in student performance, using the student learning outcomes as context.

In prior years, the ACTs have asked for additional information, including faculty (open-ended) surveys, scores on specific questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), internship supervisor surveys, and information from other sources. This year, the ACT in Composition will receive the scores from a rubric-oriented assessment, for example. The results of this assessment will be shared with Faculty Senate subcommittees, as well as with faculty via this newsletter in the future.

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Rubric Assessments Activity in 2007-2008: Critical Thinking and Math/Reasoning

During the 2008 Winter and Spring terms, assessments of student work samples in two areas occurred, in math/reasoning and critical thinking. In both areas, samples of student work were selected, raters were selected and trained, and then rubrics were used to evaluate student learning. The results of these assessments were as follows:

Math/Reasoning

47 student work samples were submitted, and 30 of these were randomly selected. Using a rubric developed by SUNY faculty (and found on the assessment website), Binghamton University raters found that students performed satisfactorily in most areas, especially with regard to interpreting mathematical models, representing mathematical information, and employing quantitative methods. The raters also indicated that students may need to improve with regard to estimating and checking for reasonableness of the solutions they calculate and with regard to recognizing limits of mathematical methods. A post-evaluation expert panel indicated that the raters especially recommended that students continue to improve with regard to relying too much on formulas without first thinking through what formulas mean when solving mathematical problems.

Critical thinking

This second round of rubric-graded papers in critical thinking involved the evaluation of 100-level courses and again revealed that students generally perform well with regard to understanding different modes of argumentation but may need improvement with regard to recognizing the limitations of certain lines of argumentation and recognizing the broader relevance of their own and others' arguments. These findings support last year's conclusions, which were similar.

Both assessment exercises reveal that the average Binghamton University student performs satisfactorily in basic reasoning and critical thinking but may need further instruction and practice with regard to objectively addressing issues and understanding that not all theories and approaches address all issues.

Using Assessment Results

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- ◆ respond to a simple request to describe ways that they have used assessment information to teach their courses. If assessments have demonstrated a need for students to engage in more objective research on controversial topics, ask faculty in a program to provide examples of how they have done this. For example, in response to last year's critical thinking assessments that students needed to become more aware of library resources, university library faculty conducted a workshop on new library research resources available to students. At department and program levels, it might be interesting to ask how those who teach research courses have utilized the information introduced in the workshop.

Using assessment information and documenting its use will be helpful in future years as the university prepares for its next accreditation visit in 2010-2011. However, a more salient point, at least for faculty, is that use of assessment information has been shown to improve student learning.