

# Conversations: Assessment @ BU

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## Special Issue: Assessment Results

Welcome back, everyone! This special issue of “Conversations: Assessment @ BU” reports on three years of assessment activity. We present the results of several General Education assessments, separated into six distinct areas. We also portray a few examples of methods departments and programs use to assess student learning. We encourage all faculty teaching courses—in whatever departments and programs they might be—to review some of these findings to consider ways they can offer students opportunities to enhance their learning at Binghamton University.

As we have noted in prior newsletters, the conceptual framework for assessment at Binghamton University values the faculty’s role in the assessment process. This occurs when faculty assess student learning, followed by conversations about these assessments and recommendations to enhance student learning, which, in turn, are followed by specific classroom and curriculum-based actions by faculty when they teach their courses. In General Education assessment, this means that most conclusions and recommendations are made by faculty-based Assessment Category Teams (ACTs). In major programs of study, this means that assessment plans are implemented by faculty.

These General Education assessment results (called “benchmark reports”) are available to the Binghamton University community on the assessment website (<http://assessment.binghamton.edu>) under the link “Gen Ed Assessment.” We invite all faculty and staff interested in learning more about what these assessments have to say to review these benchmark reports.

### Upcoming Assessment Events

- ◆ **An Outcome Unwritten Is Just a Wish....** Friday, September 25, 1-3 p.m., UUW324
- ◆ **Summarizing and Using Assessment Results.** Wednesday, October 7, 1-3 p.m., Webinar, AD 712
- ◆ **Discussing Student Learning in Oral Communication Courses.** Monday, October 12, 8-10 a.m., UUW324
- ◆ **Gen Ed Course Portfolio Workshop.** Friday, November 6, 10-11 a.m., UUW 325
- ◆ **Making the Best Use of Your Data.** Tuesday, November 17, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., UUW325
- ◆ **Information Management Workshop,** jointly sponsored by the University Libraries and the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. January 2010; date, time and location TBA.

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## Results of General Education Assessment

Following are results from assessments of General Education prepared by the Assessment Category Teams (ACTs).

### Composition and Oral Communication

The ACTs in these areas last submitted their reports in 2008-2009. Overall, student performance in writing meets expectations, based on an evaluation of student papers. Student performance in oral communication meets expectations. Students might improve their writing and oral communication skills by obtaining more practice formulating appropriate arguments, evaluating evidence, and synthesizing information. In oral communication courses, students can benefit by engaging in more self-critique of their oral communication skills, in critiquing others' presentations, and in gaining exposure to different points of view.

### Global Interdependencies and Pluralism in the United States

The 2008 ACT reports in global interdependencies and pluralism in the U.S. indicate that Binghamton University students perform well in these areas. While courses in these areas are excellent and assessments indicate that students perform well, students should be further challenged to engage and grapple with the sometimes complex issues associated with pluralism in the U.S. and global interdependencies in an international context. Courses in these areas might continue specifying the student learning outcomes for these two General Education areas in their course syllabi.

### Aesthetics and Humanities

The 2007 Aesthetics ACT report and

the 2008 Humanities ACT report indicate that students perform satisfactorily in learning the subject matter and that many students are very good at understanding different approaches to how to interpret the world around them, but that students might improve with regard to use of evidence to support their points and analyzing evidence.

### Laboratory Science and Mathematics/Reasoning

The 2006 ACT report in laboratory science indicates that students meet expectations with regard to formulating hypotheses, testing those hypotheses, and understanding the scientific method. Some improvement is warranted with regard to students' abilities to analyze and interpret data. The 2008 Mathematics/Reasoning ACT report echoed similar issues, adding that a significant minority of students might improve their basic knowledge of algebra and trigonometry. The ACT reports also pointed out that students could benefit by being further challenged to apply what they learn in different contexts.

### Foreign Language and Social Sciences

Both ACT reports indicated that students are acquiring acceptable knowledge in the areas of foreign language and social science, understanding different cultures, and addressing issues and problems in ways that are objective. Foreign language learning can often be complicated by a mixture of heritage and first-time language learners in the classroom.

*“As our ability to communicate the value of (our) experience grows each year we must enhance our ability to deliver on two important student desires: the desire to belong and the desire to do something significant in this world.”*

**Richard Torgerson,**  
President,  
Luther College

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## Assessment Results for Majors and Programs

Assessment of the educational offerings has continued to improve over the last couple of years, especially in the areas of direct assessment and the quality of faculty conversations about assessment. This summer, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment requested that departments submit reports about their assessment activities over the last few years. The results have shown that many departments are using information to base faculty conversations on actual assessments of student work and to make recommendations about enhancing student learning. Some examples of departments and programs with outstanding assessment processes include the following. (There are more examples, but we list only a limited number here.)

- ◆ The **Geography Department** has used e-portfolios and surveys to assess student learning, using specific student learning outcomes as its point of reference. The results have been presented at faculty retreats for conversation and recommendations.
- ◆ The **Biology Department** has specific student learning outcomes in the areas of scientific investigation, critical evaluation, communication, and application of biological concepts. It uses career outcomes, student surveys, and faculty-based expert panels as its assessment methods.
- ◆ The **Arabic Studies Program** has developed student learning outcomes standardized according to Modern Standard Arabic and uses ACTFL proficiency guidelines.
- ◆ The **Psychology Department** uses NSSE and other survey results and samples of student writing from writing intensive courses and has reviewed student work at a psychology research fair.
- ◆ The **Asian and Asian American Studies Program** reviews projects and papers submitted in a capstone course, as well as an exit (senior) survey, and shares the results with faculty for discussion and action.
- ◆ The **Chemistry Department** asks instructors and Curriculum Committee members to evaluate students' performance with regard to four learning outcomes. The department has discovered a high degree of student accomplishment and has identified action items to help students maintain such a high degree of performance.
- ◆ The **Decker School of Nursing** has an integrated strategic plan in which the assessment of student learning plays an important part. It used exam scores, clinical evaluation, and survey data that are linked to specific professional competencies. A number of faculty committees discuss student performance and ways to enhance such performance further. Decker just passed its accreditation review, which judged the school quite favorably.

*"Those institutions that will thrive in the twenty-first century will be those that can deliver the highest quality educational services to their students."*

**Steven D. Spangehl**

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### Major and Program Assessment *(continued from page 3)*

- ◆ The **School of Management** has developed an assessment system that specifies student learning outcomes, defined as functional competence, critical thinking, ethical awareness, international dimension of management, social/organizational skills, and understanding of technology. It uses a system of Digital Measures in which faculty estimate the degree to which students perform above, at, and below expectations, and has developed a system by which faculty are informed of issues with student learning.
- ◆ The **Watson School of Applied Science and Engineering** has a long-standing tradition of asking faculty to estimate student achievement in areas aligned with specific student learning outcomes and then communicating the results of those assessments to faculty committees for discussion and action.
- ◆ The **Public Administration Program** has specified student learning outcomes, which are then assessed by agency/internship supervisors and faculty teaching capstone courses. As a result of these assessment activities, faculty have identified specific ways to enhance student learning in their program.

### Gen Ed Assessment *(continued from page 2)*

#### Critical Thinking and Information Management (Literacy)

The last ACT report was in 2007, and a new report will be produced in spring 2010. In Binghamton University's General Education program of study, it is assumed that critical thinking and the ability to access information in meaningful ways are "infused within the curriculum," and therefore students are challenged to evaluate arguments in all General Education courses. An evaluation of student papers using a rubric developed by SUNY faculty reveals that, in general, students meet expectations in the areas of focusing on a target argument, writing effective conclusions to papers, logically supporting their arguments, presenting reasonable arguments, developing arguments that are logically consistent, identifying qualifications and objections, and identifying the broader relevance of their arguments. Alumni and senior students believe that they have acquired acceptable skills in these areas, although faculty surveys and focus groups indicate that

there are concerns with regard to students' ability to engage in objective research and to successfully access information resources beyond Wikipedia and Google®.

#### How OIRA Can Help

The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment seeks to assist faculty, staff, and others interested in the assessment of student learning. We facilitate focus groups and expert panels, assist with the assessment portions of grants, assist with the learning assessment in research projects, work with faculty, graduate and undergraduate directors to assess student learning, and seek to document ways faculty are using assessment in their teaching and to enhance student learning. Please contact Sean McKittrick, Assistant Provost and Director of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, at x76938 or [smckitri@binghamton.edu](mailto:smckitri@binghamton.edu) should you need assistance in any way.