

Conversations: Assessment @ BU

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Winter 2007

ABET accreditors praise Watson's assessment system

The School of Engineering experienced a visit from its program accreditor, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). The visit went very well, and the School of Engineering was lauded for its use of assessment in monitoring student learning for use in curriculum, teaching, and learning. The accreditation team especially praised the School of Engineering for the development of an assessment system in one department in which instructors reported how many students exceeded, met, approached, and did not meet expectations related to highly specific student learning objectives. Instructors were also able to add comments about how well they felt students had met course prerequisites and how well they had performed in courses in general. When examined in the aggregate, the information has the potential for helping departments and programs to observe trends in student performance at course, program, and department levels so the faculty can address any weaknesses and build upon strengths they find.

ABET's recognition of the School of Engineering's assessment system is not surprising, given that Binghamton University's last accreditation visit by the Middle States Association singled out that program as one that might be emulated by other programs at the university, because it accomplishes the rare feat of connecting everyday faculty-based classroom practice with a broader need to demonstrate how well students perform at program, department, and college levels. Congratulations to the faculty, staff, and administration in the Watson School of Engineering for work well done!

National Survey of Student Engagement set for Spring 2007

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) will be conducted in Spring 2007. The NSSE is a well-recognized survey completed by over a million students a year. It measures students' engagement in education activities, in their level of academic challenge, in their dealings with key student services, and in their interaction with faculty, staff, administrators, and other students. Question averages can be compared over time (the last time BU participated in the survey was 2001), to other like institutions (in our case, to other doctoral-extensive institutions), and to all other institutions participating in the survey.

A significant benefit of the NSSE is that its questions ask students to report occurrences of events, how often they effectively interact with other students, faculty and staff, and how many times they complete certain academic activities.

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A call to action: Interested in assessment research?

We are seeking a group of faculty and staff who are interested in learning from one another about how assessment impacts students learning. While funding is not currently available, there are numerous opportunities to publish articles, case studies, and analyses related to how assessment is used in the classroom to help faculty reflect on their teaching, how it can be used to enhance student learning outcomes, how assessment can be used to apply for grants, and other areas of interest.

If anyone would like to form a lunch group or other discussion group on how to conduct assessment in the interest of demonstrating how it impacts learning, teaching, and curriculum — and possibly publishing or applying for grants using this information — please contact Sean McKittrick at smckitri@binghamton.edu or x72150.

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NSSE (continued from p. 1)

It does not rely merely on student impressions; instead, it focuses on student reports of how frequently they have engaged in key activities. Especially for Binghamton University, participation in the NSSE enables us to understand something about how freshman and senior students are best engaged in their studies and how well they feel they are learning in the General Education program, among other things. It also gives us good, well-trusted information that can be used by colleges, departments, and programs to manage student learning, program curriculum, and instruction.

Beginning in late January 2007, randomly selected freshman and senior students will be contacted by email and invited to answer the survey. These students will be contacted five times during the semester and asked to answer all questions. We will receive the results in Summer 2007.

After we receive the results, we will then have a number of campus-wide discussions about how to use the information for assessment and informational purposes.

Those of you who are interested can access the survey by going to the NSSE site, <http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>, and reviewing the survey instrument. In the meantime, if you have suggestions about how to improve response rates, please contact Sean McKittrick at smckitri@binghamton.edu or x72150.

Assessment workshops scheduled for Spring 2007

Two assessment workshops were held during the Fall 2006 semester, the first for department chairs, associate/assistant deans, and other interested parties entitled "Effective and Efficient Assessment: A Guide for Department Chairs," and the second for all interested individuals entitled "Writing and Using Effective Assessment Plans."

Both workshops involved discussions about the importance of having clearly stated student learning objectives, appropriate and useful assessments, plans to discuss findings with program faculty, and plans to use and document the results of such discussions in the interest of enhancing teaching, student learning, and curriculum. Much of what was learned from the workshop has been applied in several settings.

Two workshops will be held during Spring 2007:

- "Assessing Learning for Classroom Success," Friday, February 16
- "Assessing When Numbers Don't Count," Friday, March 23

The first workshop will assist faculty and graduate teaching assistants in understanding how their own course objectives can be linked to department and program student learning outcomes. Participants will be invited to match department and program student learning outcomes with their own course objectives and to learn about various uncomplicated ways to assess student learning for their own purposes and how to use such information to enhance student learning, to improve student learning, and to implement program curricula.

The second workshop focuses on assessing student learning outcomes when it seems impossible to summarize student learning through quantitative means, such as through the use of surveys, standardized tests, or pre- and post-tests. Its focus will be upon discourse-oriented methods, such as the use of Delphi or expert (faculty focus group) panels that can be used to systematically describe strengths and weaknesses in student performance. After being introduced to a number of these assessment methods, participants will practice using them and learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of this approach through their own reflections and lessons learned through participation in the workshop.

"In our view, the essential ingredient to implementing and maintaining effective outcomes assessment processes lies with building the involvement of the faculty."

**Franklin King and
Keith Schimmel,
North Carolina A&T
State University**

Focus on results: Assessment examples from Chemistry and Asian & Asian-American Studies

As promised in our last newsletter, we continue to share some exemplary assessment activities and reports from the Binghamton University community. In this second newsletter, we share two examples, one from an inter-disciplinary department and another from the sciences:

Asian and Asian-American Studies

The Asian and Asian American Studies program assesses student learning using two methods — a general review of senior seminar final papers and the study of senior self-reflection surveys. In the review of the senior seminar final papers, there is a concerted effort to match strengths and weaknesses in student performance to the program's specific student learning objectives. The review includes specific reflections on how students performed related to those objectives and what those reflections have to say about the degree to which students are mastering them. The self-reflection survey results list responses to open-ended questions and ask students to report on any strengths and weaknesses they might feel exist in the program. In total, both assessments are used not only to write a required assessment report, but to inform the program about how well it is doing with respect to providing the resources students need to learn, as well as to how well students are achieving the learning goals of the program. Because the program is interdisciplinary in nature, it feels comfortable with this assessment strategy — especially because many of the courses students take are housed outside the program. Reflecting upon student learning in the senior seminar is therefore the best fit for this program.

Chemistry

The Chemistry Department uses various assessments, including senior student and alumni questionnaires and undergraduate program director questionnaires, as well as the examination of indicators of superior performance by chemistry majors, such as publications, honors theses, fellowships, public and private sector jobs, and acceptance into graduate and professional schools. It is clear that the department provides undergraduate students with numerous opportunities to engage in research with the faculty and that faculty are aware of what students are doing after they graduate from Binghamton University. The department also has a faculty committee that meets periodically

to discuss assessment, to consider the effectiveness of the various assessments, and to reflect on what the assessments have to say about the quality of student learning, how well the department is providing services (such as advising), and other things that matter to them. In its last periodic review, in which reviewers from other universities came in to examine program quality, the assessment program was described as "extensive," suggesting an assessment process of high quality.

It is interesting to note that several other inter-disciplinary programs are considering a number of innovative, potentially informative assessment approaches. For example, a few departments are considering an approach similar to that of the Asian and Asian American Studies program and selecting samples of student work in their senior seminars. A few programs are considering taking samples of high-quality work and assessing them; any weaknesses they find, in their minds, are therefore significant, requiring their attention.

Other programs, inter-disciplinary or not, are considering ways of collecting samples of student work over several years and selecting a small, random sample from that collection. Still others are considering discourse-oriented methods, especially in graduate programs, to reflect on the quality of student work reflected in dissertations, theses, and comprehensive exams.

Gen Ed Assessment Category Teams Re-organized

The Faculty Senate Executive Committee has reorganized the Assessment Category Teams (ACTs) for all General Education categories. Each ACT consists of up to three faculty members who evaluate course portfolios that have been collected over a three-year time period, assess strengths and weaknesses in student performance, and make recommendations to the Educational Policies and Priorities Committee (EPPC) regarding ways to further enhance student learning and the General Education curriculum.

An orientation meeting will be held on Friday, February 23, from 1-3 p.m. (location TBA) to discuss procedures and to answer any questions about methods of assessing student performance.

"Assessment can be defined as

- 1. Defining clearly articulated institutional and unit-level goals;*
- 2. Implementing strategies to achieve those goals;*
- 3. Assessing achievement of those goals; and*
- 4. Using the results of those assessments to improve programs and services and inform planning and resource allocation decisions."*

Middle States
Association

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Upcoming Events:

SUNY System SCBA Rubric Training
Monday, February 5
9 a.m.-4:30 p.m.
Old Union Hall

Assessing Learning for Classroom Success
Friday, February 16
1-3 p.m.
PSPC Room C

ACT Orientation
Friday, February 23
1-3 p.m.
PSPC Room C

Gen Ed Course Portfolios
Friday, March 16
10-11 a.m.
PSPC Room EF

Assessing When Numbers Don't Count
Friday, March 23
1-3 p.m.
UUW Room 325

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Assessing General Education: Some general findings and discussion points

During the last several months, the Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment has worked with ACT members, members of the Faculty Senate, the Center for Learning and Teaching/Institute for Student Centered Learning, the University Libraries, and various faculty members to engage in a number of assessment activities. Some of these activities include:

- ◆ Working with departments and programs undergoing periodic evaluations, including external evaluators coming to Binghamton University to review programs,
- ◆ Working with the University Libraries on a library survey to investigate (among other things) how well Binghamton undergraduates perform with respect to utilizing library resources and applying critical research skills,
- ◆ Summarizing past ACT reports and recommendations regarding Binghamton's General Education outcomes,
- ◆ Collaborating with Student Affairs to analyze internship evaluations completed by intern supervisors working with the Off Campus College to observe student weaknesses and strengths related to General Education learning outcomes and students' workforce readiness, and
- ◆ Conducting a number of qualitative studies, including an electronic Delphi panel on student learning outcomes in critical thinking.

Although the analyses pertaining to the above assessments are not complete, some of the preliminary findings include the following:

- ◆ Binghamton students perform very well with respect to the Oral Communication, Foreign Language, Pluralism, and Social Science requirements. In general, students perform well

on all General Education learning outcomes. Estimates from faculty submitting course portfolios indicate that on average fewer than five percent of students fail to meet basic expectations.

- ◆ Binghamton students are very open to different cultures and welcome an environment of diversity. Results from the 2001 National Survey of Student Engagement, the 2005 Student Opinion Survey, and ACT reports for Pluralism and Global Interdependencies all indicate that students perform well when asked to consider different points of view.
- ◆ Although students perform well in all General Education categories, our survey of critical thinking skills demonstrated that student learning outcomes need improvement in regard to understanding how to write bibliographies, how to separate opinions from facts, and how to use research resources that do not rely solely on the internet, such as Wikipedia or search engines such as Google.
- ◆ Analysis of internship surveys completed by supervisors indicates that Binghamton students are well prepared for life after undergraduate study. On all questions, including those having to do with maturity, writing, oral communication skills, attendance, and knowledge base, Binghamton students on average scored between "good" and "excellent."

In the future, we will be having discussions with faculty groups on how to further enhance student performance in key areas, but so far assessments of student learning appear to say some very good things about the quality of a Binghamton University education.

Assessment Resources: Website and Blackboard Organization

A common concern expressed by faculty and staff is that there has not previously been a central site where information about assessment can be shared. As a result, we have created the following:

Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment website (<http://assessment.binghamton.edu>)

This website contains resources on General Education assessment, major assessment, workshops, and other information and announcements, including instructional slides on assessment methods and sample rubrics to be used in the Strengthening Campus Based Assessment (SCBA) process.

"Assessment at Binghamton University" Blackboard (Bb) Organization

This organization contains resources for the Binghamton University community, including articles and papers on the most recent political, social, and policy trends in assessment, PowerPoint presentations, research studies on assessment, sample assessment reports and plans, and an "Exhibit Fair" containing exemplary assessment reports and plans from BU departments and programs. Those interested in being enrolled should contact Sean McKittrick, Assistant Provost for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, at smckitri@binghamton.edu or x72150. Bb organizations are also being organized for those serving on Assessment Category Teams and for those enrolled in Spring 2007 workshops.