

# Conversations: Assessment @ BU

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## Importance of defining student learning outcomes

The first step in assessment is identifying what program or department faculty aspirations exist for student learning. Without a basic understanding of what we want students to achieve as a result of their education, it is difficult to ascertain how to assess their performance, or what we can do to motivate and challenge students to learn.

Defining these aspirations (or “student learning objectives,” to use the formal term) can be the most difficult aspect of the assessment process. Many departments do not have a disciplinary “canon,” and others feature subject matter that is taught by other departments. That said, it is important for each program of study at the university to be able to communicate to students what program faculty want students to learn before students graduate from the university.

What are some ways to define these aspirations? Some suggestions:

- ◆ Hold a meeting (or a workshop) in which faculty describe or depict (even in art form!) what knowledge, skills, and behaviors they would hope graduating students have developed at the end of the program. Discuss (probably over several meetings) what some of these objectives could be.
- ◆ Conduct an informal discussion group of students to see if they have an understanding of what they need to learn by the time they graduate. It might also be helpful to see if program and student expectations converge, or “match with faculty expectations for student learning.”

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## How can our office assist you?

The Office of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment stands ready to assist individual faculty, certificate programs, academic programs, and departments in their efforts to assess student learning. Please contact Sean McKitrick, Assistant Provost for Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment, at [smckitri@binghamton.edu](mailto:smckitri@binghamton.edu) or x72150.

To register for workshops, please contact Deborah Dunn, secretary to the Assistant Provost, at [ddunn@binghamton.edu](mailto:ddunn@binghamton.edu) or x72150.

## Spring 2008 Workshops

**Conversations About Student Learning in Aesthetics** - Friday, February 15, 12-1:30 p.m., AD 712

**Critical Thinking Workshop** - Friday, February 22, 12:30-3 p.m., UU East Lounge

**Gen Ed Course Portfolio Workshop** - Friday, February 29, 10-11 a.m., UUW 325

**Conversations About Student Learning in Humanities** - Friday, March 7, 8:30-10 a.m., AD 712



## Explaining our conceptual framework: “Conversations about Student Learning”

Even a cursory view of BU’s Blackboard organization, “Assessment at Binghamton University,” or of news about recent developments in student learning assessment, suggests the following:

1. There has been a movement toward institutions defining student learning outcomes as opposed to the feds dictating what should be learned, thanks to recent efforts by Congress and organizations that represent institutions of higher education in the U.S.
2. There has been tremendous pressure (especially by the federal government) on regional accrediting organizations (such as our accrediting organization, Middle States) to require their member organizations to demonstrate that students are learning through the use of various measures.
3. Accountability for student learning is simply not going away.

An initial reaction to these three developments might be that institutions simply measure outcomes without reference to their own curricula or merely write accountability reports, submit them, and be done with it. However, from what we are hearing from other institutions, there is an expectation that programs and majors in all institutions demonstrate that they have clearly stated aspirations for student learning and valid and reliable methods of assessing those aspirations, can demonstrate that faculty discuss these assessments, and can use lessons learned from those assessments in making decisions with regard to program curriculum and teaching.

Thus, our conceptual framework is entitled “Conversations about Student Learning at Binghamton.” Its focus is upon empowering faculty with valid and reliable information to help them make decisions about their own (and program) curriculum and about their own teaching. The conceptual framework focuses on the role faculty play. It assumes that when department and program faculty use assessment information that is valid and reliable in their eyes in periodic conversations about student performance that are grounded in mutually understood aspirations for student learning, they feel more comfortable using such information to enhance program curriculum and their own teaching.

Suggestions for future workshops are highly valued; please contact Sean McKitrick at [smckitri@binghamton.edu](mailto:smckitri@binghamton.edu) or x72150 if you have any suggestions for future workshops.

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### Importance of defining student learning objectives

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- ◆ Consult with other professionals and departments to see if aspirations are common among similar departments and programs at other institutions.

Given these suggestions, it is still not always easy. Some programs focus not on content knowledge, but on the skills they hope students will achieve, such as writing, critical thinking, or analytical or methodological skills. Sometimes it is helpful to have a person external to the department facilitate a focus group to get at common aspirations, and at other times it helps simply to focus on two or three items the faculty want graduates to achieve. In any case, the Office of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment stands ready to assist in the process. Feel free to contact Sean McKitrick at [smckitri@binghamton.edu](mailto:smckitri@binghamton.edu) or x72150.

**“Accreditation agencies should make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of their assessment as a priority over inputs or processes.”**

**Spellings  
Commission  
Report,  
September 2006**

## Undergraduate alumni survey results available

The Office of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment conducted an alumni survey during the Fall 2007 semester. In consultation with the Alumni Office, 6,404 alumni email addresses were identified. Each alumnus was invited to complete the survey electronically, and over 1,300 alumni chose to respond.

The results indicate that Binghamton University alumni are in general quite pleased with the education and services they received as undergraduate students. Specifically, alumni praised the overall instruction they received in their majors, library services, and the University's emphasis on diversity and respect for individuals from different cultures and backgrounds. While alumni expressed some concern with regard to how well BU prepares students to write "grammatically correct sentences and phrases" and "think creatively," they also

praised Binghamton for preparing them to "think independently."

The results of the undergraduate alumni survey might be viewed according to college, department, and program, depending on whether or not a sufficient number of alumni identified themselves. The results could be used by faculty to review what alumni have had to say about the quality of instruction, services, and the education they received. The results might also be used for self studies, periodic reviews, and accreditation visits as part of an assessment system.

The full results of the survey are available on the Blackboard organization, "Assessment at Binghamton University." If you are interested in the results and would like to subscribe, please contact Sean McKitrick at [smckitri@binghamton.edu](mailto:smckitri@binghamton.edu).

### Workshops held as a result of assessment efforts

During the past year, and thanks to the efforts of instructors who have submitted General Education portfolios, Assessment Category Teams (ACTs) have written a number of reports about the quality of student learning. As a result of these reports, several recommendations have been made, including:

- ◆ Holding workshops on information management resources, including helping instructors understand some of the research resources that are available to them through the library and other units at the university;
- ◆ Conducting workshops that help instructors understand some techniques they can use to teach students how to revise written work;
- ◆ Teaching faculty about student learning objectives with regard to critical thinking and about the critical thinking rubric used in prior assessments of student learning in this area; and
- ◆ Facilitating a number of discipline-specific focus groups about what Binghamton University's student learning aspirations might be in areas such as social science, aesthetics, and humanities

In response to the ACTs' recommendations, a number of workshops have been (or will be) conducted. Last semester, Kelly Kinney facilitated a workshop entitled "Writing as a Process of Revision," in which faculty learned about a few techniques for teaching students how to revise written work. A focus group breakfast was held to better understand what our campus aspirations in the social sciences are. This semester, the University Libraries held a workshop called "Information Management in the Age of Google," and future workshops will be held on critical thinking. With the exception of the focus group, all of these events feature faculty as the primary facilitators.

*"If there is one thing that is fresh to this discussion, it is the call to define our educational purposes first. Most of the discussions have been a frantic hunt for the right measure to report scores. This is about a thoughtful quest for the right aims to guide learning."*

**Carol Geary Schneider, American Association of Colleges and Universities**

*"...if assessment for 'them' can be about demonstrating a commitment to student learning and being accountable for a process, then institutions will be able to place their time and energy where it belongs: with the students."*

**Jeremy Penn, "Assessment for us, and assessment for them," InsideHigher.com, June 26, 2007**

## For more information:

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## Conversations: Assessment @ BU

### Eye on method: The expert panel

Assessing student learning can often be achieved by identifying major assignments and discussing students' strengths and weaknesses on those assignments, especially when such discussions are in reference to a department's or program's aspirations for student learning. This is especially true in graduate and interdisciplinary programs, in which courses are often taught in different departments, or when students' specializations are so disparate as to make assessment of single objectives quite difficult.

One way of assessing student learning in these situations is to focus on one major assignment (such as a senior paper, thesis, or dissertation), identify expectations for student learning, and assemble faculty who have graded these assignments in one room (at the same time) to identify common strengths and weaknesses. The procedure is as follows:

1. Select a key point in time or specific assignment (or student performance) in which students demonstrate specific knowledge, skills, behaviors, or competencies;

2. Align these with specific student learning aspirations or objectives for the department or program;
3. Establish the criteria for evaluation, or "ground rules" for how faculty know that student performance is "weak" or "strong" in light of these aspirations;
4. Conduct a discussion among faculty in one place and at one time, recording what you feel are consensus strengths and weaknesses in the designated assignment (s);
5. Take time to discuss how such strengths and weaknesses might be continued or improved upon;
6. Follow up to ascertain what progress has been made.

The key to the process is that the expert panel is based on a systematic review of student performance (in aggregate), especially with regard to pre-determined student learning objectives or aspirations. Barbara Walvoord of the University of Notre Dame calls this process "pattern trait analysis." The results can be used as part of a wider assessment process and can even be eventually used to develop rubrics, if program faculty are so interested.

### Assessment reports due at end of Spring 2008 semester

At the end of each Spring semester, each undergraduate and graduate director is asked to answer four questions with regard to programs and majors:

1. What are the student learning objectives for the program, and what activities have occurred this semester with regard to these objectives—have they changed and/or have student learning assessments caused faculty to discuss these student learning objectives?
2. What assessment activities have occurred this year with regard to the student learning objectives for the program? What have these assessments found about student learning?
3. What faculty-based conversations have occurred as a result of this assessment activity?
4. How have these faculty-based conversations and student learning assessments impacted program curriculum, instruction, etc.?

The results are used to help track assessment activity in academic affairs at Binghamton University, to assess the effectiveness of the Office of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment, and to help find ways to assist programs and departments in their efforts to assess student learning. Aggregate results are reviewed and presented as part of the office's strategic planning efforts, which can be found online at <http://assessment.binghamton.edu>.