

Conversations: Assessment @ BU

Volume 3, Issue 2

Winter 2009

Examples of Excellent Assessment Activities

Several departments have developed assessment approaches that appear meaningful to them as they attempt to manage their own curricula and to affect curriculum in impactful ways. Some recent examples include:

- ◆ The biomedical engineering graduate program has developed an assessment system in which faculty evaluate student performance with reference to specific foci, all of which are important aspects of success for graduate students in that area. The faculty evaluates students according to these reference points when they complete their preliminary exams, dissertation proposals, and dissertations. The information is then tallied with regard to these foci for faculty discussion and action.
- ◆ The history undergraduate program collects samples of student work and then encourages a few faculty members to evaluate student performance with reference to specific student learning outcomes. Performance is tallied according to different levels of performance, resulting in specific information about the quality of student work.
- ◆ The psychobiology and studio art programs have recently engaged in expert panels, in which (after grading student work), faculty discuss students' strengths

Continued on page 2

Written Assessment Reports Due in April 2009

Every year, the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment asks departments to submit reports about the following questions:

1. What are the student learning outcomes for your program, and if there have been any changes, what are they?
2. What assessments do you use to assess these student learning outcomes, and what have you discovered as a result of this assessment activity?
3. How have faculty discussed or reflected upon (1) and (2), and what recommendations and action items have stemmed from the process?
4. What has been the result of the process?

In prior years, we have asked departments and programs to send emails responding to these questions. This year, we are asking departments and programs to do so in paper format because of the upcoming visit from Middle States, the university's primary accreditor. The process will help save departments time as we write the university's self study next year, as we are required at that time to include assessment reports for each department and program in the visiting team exhibit center.

Inside this issue:

Why portfolio assessment?	2
General Education reports submitted	3
Need help?	3
Why direct assessment?	4



Why Portfolio Assessment?

For a number of years, the Faculty Senate and the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment have collaborated on a particular method of assessing General Education. This method involves randomly selecting courses for participation and then asking the instructors of record for these courses to submit course portfolios containing the following:

1. a course syllabus;
2. an estimate of the number of students who exceed, meet, approach, and do not meet expectations with regard to each General Education student learning outcome for the selected course;
3. four samples of students work: one that exceeds expectations, one that meets, one that approaches, and one that does not meet expectations;
4. a narrative statement of how, in the instructor's opinion, the course addressed the General Education student learning outcomes assigned to the course; and
5. a narrative statement addressing strengths and weaknesses in student performance with regard to each of the General Education student learning outcomes, in the instructor's opinion.

Every three years, three faculty members on what is called an "assessment category team" review the portfolios and write a report after being provided with survey information and other information that might be helpful. So far, assessment category team members have expressed their opinion that the course portfolios are quite helpful in helping them understand student learning. Surprisingly (at least for us), many ACT members have found the narrative statements to be most informative—as they read the portfolios, they have been able to discover common themes and issues, which have led to meaningful and sometimes engrossing conversations about what recommendations might be made to improve student learning.

Portfolio assessment, as a qualitative design, has enabled us to respect the expertise and skill that faculty bring to the table, without our relying unduly on standardized tests. As of this date, over 95 percent of faculty surveyed are of the opinion that the process provides meaningful information, and over 85 percent feel that the process was not unduly time consuming. Moreover, this kind of assessment has enabled Binghamton University to assert its longstanding position that faculty-based (and not standardized) assessment can be meaningful in both the short and long term. Thank you to everyone who has participated in the process so far!

"...the rhetoric of change is quick and easy but substantive change is the only real objective."

**Robert L. Ringel,
"Managing
Change in Higher
Education,"
Assessment and
Accreditation
Forum, Fall 2000**

Excellent Assessment Activities *(continued from page 1)*

- ◆ and weaknesses in learning and then complete a post-panel survey to observe areas in which they agree or disagree on these statements.
- ◆ The undergraduate biology program uses faculty panels (which review samples of student work and tally student performance with regard to specific student learning expectations), student surveys, and alumni surveys to assess student learning outcomes

These are only a few examples of some of the excellent work accomplished by departments throughout the university. If you need assistance with any assessment approaches, please contact Sean McKittrick at x76938.

General Education Reports Submitted

As part of the university's General Education assessment activities, the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment has conducted portfolio assessments in the following areas, working with assessment category teams (ACTs):

- ◆ Oral Communication
- ◆ Mathematics/Reasoning (both rubric grading and portfolio assessment)
- ◆ Pluralism
- ◆ Global Interdependencies
- ◆ Composition (both rubric grading and portfolio assessment)

The reports indicated that student performance was satisfactory in most areas, and that students at Binghamton University are receiving a good education by achieving the student learning outcomes associated with our General Education program.

Interestingly, some themes emerged that were common across these areas.

Several assessment category teams mentioned that students are generally quite good at acquiring content knowledge (and communicating it), but some students might improve with regard to synthesizing information and applying information to new scenarios or situations.

The assessment category teams also encouraged faculty to be explicit about the student learning outcomes they want to achieve in class, as well as to include the student learning outcomes on their course syllabi, especially in courses which meet more than one General Education requirement (such as courses that have both Composition and Oral Communication as their General Education areas).

These results have been shared with the University Undergraduate Curriculum Committee as well as the Educational Policies and Procedures Committee.

“...institutions need to do more to treat accreditation as an ongoing element of quality improvement, not an abrupt and not always welcome intervention.”

**Judith S. Eaton,
President of the
Council for Higher
Education
Accreditation,
quoted in
InsideHigherEd.com,
January 23, 2009**

Direct Assessment *(continued from page 4)*

the results to an assessment or curriculum committee or to a greater number of faculty.

Internships. In this case, a survey is designed, and internship supervisors, supervising faculty, or others who directly observe student performance comment on how well students apply certain skills learned as a result of their education.

There are more methods, but important to all approaches is that the method is aligned (or has something to do with) with the program's or department's student learning objectives. The result of the assessment can be meaningful information which might be used to enhance curriculum, target teaching to students' needs, or anything else important to helping a department meet its objectives.

Need Help?

The Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment assists with assessment in many forms.

Some examples include:

- ◆ Assessment of the major
- ◆ Assessment of grant outcomes (especially regarding impacts on students and their learning)
- ◆ General Education assessment
- ◆ Academic affairs surveys or focus groups

Please contact Sean McKitrick at x6938 should you need any assistance.

For more information:

Sean McKittrick, Assistant Provost for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
smckitri@binghamton.edu

Liz Abate, Assistant for Undergraduate Education
labate@binghamton.edu

Debra Sanders, Secretary to the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and International Affairs and the Assistant Provost for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
dsanders@binghamton.edu

Phone: x72150
FAX: x74831
Website:
<http://assessment.binghamton.edu>

Conversations is published three times each year: Fall, Winter, & Summer

Conversations: Assessment @ BU

Why Direct Assessment?

Assessment of student learning can be approached in two ways—indirectly or directly.

Indirect assessments are usually in the form of surveys and focus groups and do not involve the evaluation of student work samples. Direct assessments involve the review of student work samples in the form of essays, performances, or assignments.

Direct assessment is important because it is less interpretive than indirect assessments. For example, surveys, while important in many respects, usually involve opinions that can be confused with beliefs, expectations, satisfaction levels, attitudes, and even moods. In business, customer service surveys help companies understand how satisfied their customers feel, but these same surveys might not help address product quality. To use a medical metaphor—surveys might reveal that patients receiving CAT scans are quite happy with the radiology staff and with the comfort of procedure, but very rarely assess the accuracy of the CAT scan itself (a scary proposition if one wants to understand diagnostic accuracy and its impact on patient treatment).

Direct assessments come in many forms, some of which are not as complicated as one might think. Some ideas:

Expert panels. Especially in interdisciplinary and graduate programs, faculty identify key assignments, papers, and projects that all students complete in the program. Faculty look at the program's objectives, determine which ones are addressed by the assignments, and meet to discuss students' strengths and weaknesses. They then list these "findings" and share them with the greater department. Even better, in a technique known as "pattern trait scoring," faculty create a simple matrix such as this:

Assignment: Doctoral qualifying examinations

	Excellent	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
Use of objective information	XX	X	XXXXXX
Use of different schools of thought when addressing the assignment's case study	XXXXXX	XX	X

The faculty then look at the "patterns." In this example, faculty have chosen to look at the doctoral qualifying exam and might conclude that students completing the exam might need assistance with regard to "use of objective information."

Rubrics. A number of faculty design a rubric and then grade a sample of assignments that have something to do with student performance with regard to a department's or program's student learning outcomes. These faculty then report

Continued on page 3