

Report on Assessment Work
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August 2005

Upon appointment as the new Director of Assessment, I immediately did two things. First, I had several meetings with my predecessor, John Bart, to determine the status of assessment, to begin my own assessment education, and to solicit his help in training a virtually new assessment committee. Second, I recruited a new committee to renew the work of the previous committee that was inactive and essentially disbanded, and in particular, to develop an assessment plan for general education and our integrative outcomes.

Six talented and dedicated faculty who were willing to work this summer were recruited to serve on the re-established committee. One member, Bruce Ammann, had served on the previous committee and another, Peg Preston, served one semester. The other four members were new to the Assessment Committee: Richard Swanson, Marty Dennis, Val Olness and Duane Weisshaar. Two members, Richard and Val, had served on the Curriculum Council during a time when it considered assessment issues and thus could offer the perspective of the governance body to which we are responsible.

Department Assessment

The previous Assessment Committee along with John Bart, the Director of General Education and John Clementson, the Director of Assessment, focused on department assessment during the 2003-04 academic year. Departments are at varying stages in developing and implementing their assessment plans. One of the things that needs to be done is to determine the current status of each department's assessment work. To that end, we are planning to conduct a survey of departments to ascertain what has been done, what yet needs to be done, and what resources if any are needed.

Integrative Outcomes

The previous committee did not address the assessment of general education as the Curriculum Council decided that it would retain the responsibility to develop educational outcomes for general education. This included overall, integrative goals as well as outcomes for the areas within general education. As departments were now responsible for their own assessment plans and because general education outcomes were being developed by the Curriculum Council, the Assessment Committee lapsed into dormancy during the 2004-05 academic year.

In spring, 2005, the Council initiated discussions of integrative outcomes that included discussion with the faculty. It specified several outcomes that were adopted in principle by the faculty at the May 4, 2005 faculty meeting. See the attached outcomes. The Assessment Committee was subsequently charged with developing an assessment plan to measure these outcomes. This work was begun this summer and is reported below.

The Curriculum Council will develop area outcomes using groups of faculty who teach in the respective areas. We have requested to be involved in these conversations. They will occur during the 2005-06 academic year. Following the approval of area outcomes, the Assessment Committee will find ways to measure them.

Summer 2005 Work, Direction and Emerging Concepts

The new Assessment Committee had its organizational meeting on May 20 that included the following:

- I distributed a binder of background and assessment materials that I had assembled for information and training.
- We discussed the nature and scope of our task including our relationship to the Curriculum Council.
- We began to develop a “philosophy” of assessment.
- We agreed that it would be wise to learn from the experience of other comparable colleges that were further along in assessment. Accordingly, I encouraged committee members to read the materials I had distributed, to read other things on assessment that they might locate on their own, and to talk with colleagues at other institutions about their assessment plans and experience.
- We identified dates that we could use for training and subsequent work.

We met several times throughout the summer. The most important aspects of our work are described below.

Training

Training involved two components. First, committee members individually read assessment materials that I had provided them. Most helpful was a wonderful little book on assessment recommended by John Bart; *Assessment clear and simple: A practical guide for institutions, departments and general education* by Barbara Walvoord, a nationally recognized expert on assessment. She indeed offers a clear and simple approach to assessment, one that informed and affirmed the direction and assessment philosophy that we were beginning to fashion and would continue to do so.

The second component of training was a session we had with John Bart. He provided a very thorough and useful history of assessment at Augustana, gave a frank appraisal of our current assessment status and efforts, described resources, discussed different assessment strategies, offered suggestions for future work, and identified challenges. He cautioned us several times not to overburden the faculty with assessment.

Visits with assessment people at other colleges

As indicated above, we thought it wise to benefit from the assessment experience at other comparable colleges. I made arrangements while on personal trips to visit assessment people at two other colleges while Peg Preston visited with a friend who was the Academic Dean of a

small liberal arts college.

My first visit was with Paul Moes of Calvin College who is an assessment consultant. Paul has been doing assessment work since 1988. He was a key figure in developing the assessment program at Dordt College before moving to Calvin. His approach to assessment is practical and sensible and the visit was particularly valuable. He emphasized the following points:

- He repeated several times the basic principle, K.I.S.S. (“keep it simple stupid”).
- It is better to identify fewer rather than more outcomes so everyone knows them and then do a good job in assessing them.
- Senior interviews and focus groups and alumni surveys (which he characterized as moderately direct assessment) can be very valuable if they focus on what students learned and in the case of alumni what they perhaps didn’t learn.
- Don’t try to do everything at once. Develop a multi-year plan and rotate different outcomes and different strategies in and out of an assessment cycle.
- The Higher Learning Commission is not concerned with assessment per se. Rather they are concerned with whether assessment results are used to guide changes that lead to improvement.
- Use assessment to find flaws or weaknesses in the educational process.

Paul described a unique integrated assessment tool that Dordt developed to assess cognitive, personal and affective growth in students. A “social challenges” essay that assessed critical thinking, different kinds of understanding, and personal development was administered to all seniors (and to a portion of freshmen for comparison purposes). This integrative assessment is intriguing in that it could be adapted for use with our integrative outcomes and incorporated into our capstone courses that are intended to be integrative, values-oriented, issue-oriented, and concerned with how to live. More on this possibility below.

Paul noted that Dordt was doing well with assessment of general education but not so well with department assessment.

My second visit was with John Clementson and David Fienen of Gustavus Adolphus College. John is our former Assessment Director and David, who has been extensively involved in curricular matters in a variety of roles, is currently the Director of General Education. Gustavus is doing quite well with department assessment but is lagging in assessment of general education. Department assessment has been an integral part of program review for six years and is taken very seriously by departments and academic leadership. Assessment is an ongoing, annual activity that culminates in annual department reports that are **reviewed and used to identify needs** by academic leaders. The reports are one page and organized around three basic questions: What student learning outcomes did you assess this year? What did you learn from the assessment? What subsequent changes based on what you learned did you make?

David commented that Gustavus now has a “culture of assessment.” Two factors that contributed to the formation of this culture were 1) that assessment was centrally integrated into program review and taken seriously and 2) that each department developed and implemented **its**

assessment plan based on what **it** deemed important and useful to know about student learning. He noted another problem that we also face. Students take a variety of courses to satisfy general education requirements which makes it difficult to identify common outcomes. Finally, an observation based on John and David's description of their ongoing and emerging approach to assessing general education. Their approach thus far appears more "natural" in that it is driven and directed by its general education review including extensive conversations among the general education faculty that led to more specific criteria that will provide the basis for assessment. While Augustana has not engaged in an extensive review of general education, the Curriculum Council is facilitating conversation among groups of faculty who are teaching in the various areas of general education with the goal of developing more specific area goals.

Peg Preston visited with Dean De La Motte, the Academic Dean at Belmont Abbey College. While not exclusively focused on assessment, Dean offered two pieces of advise that seem relevant for us. First, like Paul Moes, he endorsed the K.I.S.S. principle. Second, he advised against any avoidance behavior when dealing with our accrediting agency. Rather, he suggested a proactive approach; err on the side of being too present and asking too many questions.

Our "philosophy" of assessment

We are intent on producing an assessment plan that would not be burdensome, would be supported by the faculty, and would produce valuable information. To that end, we developed some basis guiding principles and concepts:

- assessment is guided by a fundamental principle: what do we expect students to learn - know, be able to do, and value (outcomes), and how do we know whether they have learned it (assessment)?
- assessment is not an end, but a means to enhancing student learning
- assessment should be simple, useful, efficient and cost-effective
- assessment is about making more explicit and systematic the informal assessment we are already doing
- assessment is a work-in progress
- assessment does not require doing everything at once

It is our expectation that departments may well adopt the same or similar guidelines.

Augustana Educational Outcomes

We briefly reviewed the integrative outcomes that were adopted by the faculty at the May faculty meeting. The following concerns were expressed:

1. Written and oral communication are combined. Because in actual practice they will likely be assessed differently, perhaps it would be wise to separate them.
2. Whereas most sub-outcomes are global, at least one is strangely specific (e.g., "students will be able to use proper grammar.")
3. Finding ways to assess listening skills may be cumbersome. Furthermore, perhaps we should assume that students possess this skill like we assume that they possess reading skills.

4. While it appears feasible to assess writing skills with multiple audiences and in multiple contexts because writing is so ubiquitous across the curriculum, that may not be the case for oral communication. It is quite possible for Augustana students to graduate without having made an oral presentation in any of their classes, at least an oral presentation for which they were solely responsible.

5. There is no diversity outcome. Granted that a cultural diversity outcome may emerge from Area 3.6 conversations, there are other kinds of diversity. Because diversity is addressed across the curriculum, perhaps we need an integrative diversity outcome.

While we think these concerns eventually need to be addressed, we did not think they were within our purview, at least for our summer work. Therefore, we proceeded with the outcomes as they were approved by the faculty.

Written communication

As mentioned above, writing is ubiquitous in the curriculum. It is assessed already in many classes that involve multiple contexts and multiple audiences. Furthermore, we became aware that some departments and individuals are already using formal criteria and standards (rubrics) in their evaluation of students' writing skills and that the criteria employed are similar. Given that, we thought it quite feasible and desirable to develop an across-the-curriculum set of writing criteria that could be used in any course with a significant writing project. Faculty would be encouraged to use them, particularly in "W" component courses. We think that the use of a common set of criteria would improve the teaching of writing, enhance student's writing skills, and provide a natural, simple, cost-efficient way of assessing writing. And it would be faithful to one of the guiding principles mentioned above - to make explicit and more systematic what faculty are already doing.

Here is how it might be done. Faculty who are already reading and grading papers and agree to use the common criteria would only have to take the little time that is required to specifically rate each criterion. Some faculty are already explicitly doing this; others are doing it implicitly. Transfer of these ratings to Scantron forms would allow for easy compiling of data and subsequent analysis. Samples of student writing could easily be compared to determine improvement (e.g., from Freshman Composition to senior writing projects). For departments or individual faculty who have more specialized writing assignments (e.g., discipline oriented), it would be easy to add additional criteria to the common ones.

The advantages of this approach are several. It would make clear to students what is meant by good writing. They would encounter the same criteria in many classes which would reinforce the common elements of good writing. The use of this kind of embedded assessment would obviate the need to use some kind of contrived writing assignment that has no meaning or value to the student.

Integrative assessment

We were quite intrigued by an integrative assessment model developed at Dordt College to

assess their integrative general education goals (see the earlier report on my visit with Paul Moes). It would appear that a similar approach could be used for assessing several of our integrative outcomes. Such an approach might be a natural assessment in some of our capstone courses. Most capstone courses are organized around significant social and cultural issues with ethical, moral and character considerations that ultimately lead to the question of how students live their lives. If capstone courses already include a major writing assignment, might we be able to use these papers as a means for assessing some of our integrative outcomes? Dordt has demonstrated that student essays can be used to assess student growth in a number of areas without a lot of extra effort. Can we develop a reliable, cost-efficient ratings scheme for the outcomes we are particularly interested in assessing (e.g., critical thinking, writing, incorporating knowledge, recognizing and applying moral values)? Would capstone instructors who assign major papers be willing to adopt our rubric?

We think this idea has considerable promise that we plan to explore with our colleagues. Here is a tentative set of dimensions based on our integrative outcomes that we intend to use as a basis for discussion with faculty, particularly capstone faculty. It borrows heavily from the Dordt model but reflects the capstone nature of our capstone courses (i.e., capstone courses are meant to integrate important parts of the student's learning experiences at Augustana and impact how they live their lives).

level of critical thinking

- able to articulate a reasoned argument
- able to synthesize information from several perspectives
- understands complexity of issue

level of moral reasoning and judgement

- understands moral dimension of issue
- able to apply moral norms and principles
- exhibits internalized sense of values and applies to issue

historical and structural understanding

- understands historical context of the problem
- recognizes how social and cultural factors (values and structures) contribute to the problem and to a proper response

perception of personal and communal responsibility

- recognizes need for personal and communal action
- sees self as responsible for dealing with issues in concrete ways

CAAP Test

On May 24, 2005, Brenda Murtha and I attended a workshop sponsored by the SD Board of Regents in Pierre on the SDOS (South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship) and the CAAP test (Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency). Brenda attended in order to learn more about the details of the Board requirement that SDOS Scholars take the test for retaining their scholarships. I attended to learn more about the test as an assessment tool. See the attached June 3, 2005 report on this workshop for more information.

It is unclear how useful or valuable the CAAP test might be in our assessment program. One concern has to do with the fit between the areas tested and our outcomes. A second concern involves when our students would take the test. Because our SDOS students will have to take the test, most in their sophomore year, we recommend study of the test results for this sample of our students to determine whether we might want to use it more broadly in our assessment program.

Conversations with faculty

We think it is imperative to engage faculty in conversation about the assessment concepts we are developing in order 1) to determine the feasibility and desirability of the concepts, 2) to ascertain and secure faculty support, and 3) to use feedback to revise or refine the ideas. At this point in our work, we need faculty reaction to three ideas discussed above that have been the focus of our summer work; our guiding philosophy, an across-the-curriculum set of writing criteria and standards, and integrative assessment in capstone.

We have begun these conversations by first meeting with the Curriculum Council in late July. The Council members expressed support for the ideas and encouraged us to proceed with further development of the ideas and more faculty conversation. We plan to do the following:

- I will present our assessment ideas to the department and division chairs at their first meeting of the year.
- I will briefly report on these concepts at the opening faculty meeting. Later we will arrange a faculty forum that will allow for more interaction and feedback.
- The committee will arrange a meeting with Capstone faculty to discuss the feasibility, desirability and interest in incorporating integrative assessment in capstone courses.

Future work

Thus far we have focused on using embedded assessment to measure our integrative outcomes. We will continue to meet throughout the year to revise and refine these ideas based on faculty feedback and support. We will consider other assessment strategies and develop an assessment cycle. And we will revise the original five-year assessment plan incorporating our actual accomplishments and what we expect to do in the next year and beyond. We expect that the new Associate Dean will be a major asset as we continue planning and implementing assessment.