

## Report on Assessment Work

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Prior to my appointment as Director of Assessment in Spring, 2005, assessment work and planning were ably led by John Clementson who was the Director of Assessment until leaving Augustana after Spring, 2004 and John Bart the Associate Academic Dean and Director of General Education. The latter assumed additional assessment responsibilities as Director of Assessment when John Clementson resigned. I replaced John Bart as Director of Assessment when he stepped down and returned full time to the classroom. The leadership provided by these two and the Assessment Committee were key in moving faculty to accepting the importance of assessment and developing and implementing assessment plans. They established a foundation that made possible the assessment work described below.

The initial focus in assessment was on department assessment planning. The Bush Grant was a critical source of funds for faculty development, department planning and assessment resources. This work has been documented in previous reports. In the 2004-05 academic year, the focus shifted to the assessment of general education and the development of general learning outcomes. Again Bush funds were used to support some important activities that were part of this process. John Bart and the Curriculum Council based on conversations with the faculty identified four outcomes that were subsequently approved by the faculty in May, 2005. While these outcomes are related to general education, they are in fact viewed more broadly; that is, as outcomes that emanate from the whole curriculum. For that reason, they were identified as “Augustana educational outcomes” hereafter referred to as integrative outcomes.

As the bulk of this work was done by John Bart and the Curriculum Council and as departments were left to their own assessment development and implementation, the previously active Assessment Committee lapsed into inactivity. With the approval of integrative outcomes, the Curriculum Council assigned the development of their assessment to me and a dormant Assessment Committee. Unfortunately, there was only one member of the original committee left who could resume the work. Thus my first task as the new Director of Assessment was to recruit and train a virtually new committee. In addition to the one carryover member, I recruited five new people who had some knowledge of assessment, were willing to provide leadership to the campus assessment work, and were good committee members.

In the early part of the summer, we became oriented and largely self-trained. Each member was given a binder of all the important earlier documents related to the college’s assessment program, an excellent primer on assessment by Barbara E. Walvoord, a nationally recognized expert on assessment, who espoused a view that we were gradually evolving on our own, and other helpful assessment materials. As John Bart was probably the most knowledgeable assessment person on campus, it seemed wise to use him as a mentor and tutor. He graciously provided a day’s training for the committee which consisted of a brief history of assessment at Augustana including an appraisal of where we were currently; a review of the expectations and guidance from the HLC; a very helpful survey of assessment strategies; and suggestions for the assessment of the integrative outcomes. To benefit from the experience of other similar colleges, committee members visited several individuals who were knowledgeable about assessment work.

Particularly valuable was the consultation with Paul Moes who had been centrally involved in a very successful general education assessment program while at Dordt College. Among many helpful tips that Paul offered was one that he consistently emphasized - K.I.S.S. (keep it simple). His advice, particularly this latter admonition, validated the assessment philosophy and direction that we were developing and discussed below. Bush funds were again pivotal here. They covered one month salary support for the Director of Assessment, modest stipends for the Assessment Committee member's work in early summer, the cost of materials, and provision of an honorarium or gift cards for several of the people we consulted. The overall expenditures for the Committee's summer work was small but extremely important; we got a "lot of bang for the buck."

There were two major foci and outcomes of the committee's summer work. First, was the development of an assessment philosophy and strategy and the second was the plan for a survey of all departments regarding the status of their planning. As the committee began to understand assessment and what would work at Augustana, we decided early on that assessment should be simple, meaningful and useful, cost-effective and efficient. We viewed assessment as a natural extension of what we were already doing only more formal and systematic. As alluded to above, this philosophy was validated in Barbara Walvoord's assessment book and by Paul Moes. With this as our fundamental premise, we began to develop logical natural strategies for assessing the four integrative outcomes.

Effective writing was the one we chose for initial development guided by the above philosophy. Because writing is ubiquitous in our curriculum and the evaluation of it is something we are already doing, it seemed immanently sensible to consider developing a common set of writing criteria that could be used across the curriculum to formally assess student writing. Discussions with selected faculty began in the summer and continued in the fall with department chairs and in several departments where criteria were already being used. We are still engaged in this process. However, once agreement is reached on common criteria, we will field test them in several courses, tweak them as necessary and then make them available to all faculty with encouragement to use them. Assuming a sufficient critical mass of courses where the criteria are used, we will begin to track the improvement in students' writing skills and systematically collect and analyze these assessment data. We have begun developing a similar strategy for assessing oral communication skills, critical thinking and the ability to "recognize, evaluate and apply moral values grounded in faith."

Our philosophy and strategy was shared with department chairs, the Academic Dean and the Curriculum Council at the beginning of the 2005-06 academic year. And in fact, we recommended that departments adopt the same philosophy and strategy. It was positively received and endorsed, at least in principle. With that support, the developmental work continues. Because this approach involves considerable discussion and collaboration with faculty (some of the forums for discussion have been underwritten by Bush funds), progress has been slow but steady. Faculty cooperation and acceptance will only occur if they are convinced that such an approach is feasible and desirable, or more to the point, "simple, meaningful and useful, cost-effective and efficient."

The second major task of our summer work was to develop a survey of department assessment

work to determine the status of each department's planning and implementation. In addition, we solicited information about other issues related to assessment and possible future directions (e.g., did the department use writing criteria, were oral communication projects present in the department's curriculum, what resources or assistance did the department need, and if senior exit interviews or something comparable were used and whether this might be a means to collect assessment data). The survey instrument was sent to each department and program. Subsequently, I met individually with each person who was responsible for department assessment and completing the survey questionnaire. We jointly reviewed the information, identified and discussed problems with the department's assessment work and I offered resources and assistance. While some departments were struggling, I was pleasantly surprised to find that overall department assessment was progressing reasonably well. Most departments had developed plans, a significant number were collecting assessment data, and a few were already using the data to inform curricular and instructional decisions. Not all departments are making adequate progress however. In these cases, my approach is to work quietly to encourage and assist them as I can with occasional support from the Academic Dean.

The Bush Grant specified some intended assessment activities during the third and final year of the grant including assessment workshops, department development grants to underwrite assessment activity, and an assessment day and other forums for sharing assessment development and successes. I decided not to implement some of these activities. I thought that campus-wide workshops were not cost-effective nor necessary. Rather, as most departments were making reasonably good progress, it would be more helpful to provide resources specifically tailored to their needs. Similarly, rather than using forums, which I thought might be counterproductive, I judged that it would be more effective for me to occasionally report to the faculty and to communicate assessment strategies and successes among departments during my visits with them.

Finally, I wish to assess where we are in assessment. One of the goals of the assessment portion of the Bush Grant was to "move the college higher on the HLC levels of implementation." Regarding department assessment, with the exception of a few departments, I think the college is at Level Two: Making Progress in Implementing Assessment Programs. The assessment of general education, our integrative outcomes, we are yet at Stage One: Beginning Implementation of Assessment Programs. The structure of the assessment program and the infrastructure to support it are in development. However, the Assessment Committee, the Dean and I are satisfied with the direction and emerging program. As noted above, progress has been slow, but that is necessary in developing an assessment program that is genuinely useful and accepted and implemented by faculty.

We have clearly made progress in faculty acceptance of and attitudes toward assessment and in the development and initial implementation of an assessment program. The Bush Grant has played a critical role in this. There is now consensus that assessment can be "simple, meaningful and useful, cost-effective and efficient;" that it is not an arbitrary imposition nor need be an undue burden on faculty. While I am somewhat reluctant to use the term culture of assessment, we are in fact developing such a climate at Augustana.