

*2006-2007 Annual Summary of Academic Program Assessment at Sacramento State*

Prepared by the Office of Academic Program Assessment

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This paper provides a qualitative analysis of the 49 program assessment reports written by departments to summarize program assessment activity during the 06-07 year and submitted to the Office of Academic Affairs on July 1, 2007. Divided into two sections, the paper first describes the contents of the reports with regard to seven key assessment elements. The second section provides a discussion of the findings with implications for future assessment work.

**SECTION ONE: ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT OF THE REPORTS**

Approximately 75% of the departments within the seven Colleges submitted annual assessment reports covering the 06-07 year. This figure requires explanation, however, because the relationship between a “department” and a “program” is complex with implications for the total number and type of program assessment reports undergoing analysis. For example, the Art Department submitted one department report, which contained three program reports (one each for Art Education, Art History, and Studio Art). In contrast, Liberal Studies, a program that engages faculty from a wide variety of departments and Colleges, submitted one program report. For the purposes of this analysis, each department report that included separate program reports was partitioned into separate program reports. For example, though the Art Department submitted one department report, it contained three program reports. This analysis is based upon examination of 49 individual program reports.

Each program report was examined to answer the following questions:

1. What student learning outcomes were assessed during the 06-07 academic year?
2. What methods did programs use to assess these outcomes?
3. What findings did the reports summarize?
4. Did the reports provide a summary of how the faculty analyzed, discussed, and interpreted the findings?
5. What curricular and/or instructional actions did programs plan to take in response to their interpretations?
6. Did the programs plan to monitor the effects of these actions?
7. Did the programs implement any action plans that came about as a result of engagement in assessment activity?

The findings with respect to each question are discussed below.

1. What student learning outcomes were assessed during the 06-07 academic year?

Each report was studied to determine whether the program assessed a knowledge-based outcome, a skill or set of skills, or a value. Often, this determination was straightforward because the language of the report stated that students will “know,” “have knowledge of,” or “have skills in.” For example, the report from Anthropology included among its learning outcomes the following: Students will have “knowledge of genetics and of evolutionary forces.” The Sociology report defined the following outcome as among its concerns: Students should graduate with “skill in engaging methods and statistics in attempts to gain information about the social world.”

Report language itself made classifying value-based outcomes less clear-cut. Sometimes, as in the following example from the Gerontology report, dispositions included verbs often associated with thinking skills and implying knowledge: Students must “demonstrate socially-conscious behavior regarding the elderly population.” To demonstrate a behavior suggests a certain level of skill, and this behavior must grow out of knowledge of the elderly population. The following example from Business Management might arguably be classified partly as the skill of critical thinking but clearly as a value-based outcome: Students learn to “consider ethical issues when making decisions to achieve individual and organizational responsibilities in a business context.” The judgment that a particular outcome was or was not a value-based outcome turned on whether the outcome called for students to interact with other human beings in an ethical, sensitive, and/or professional manner.

Taken as a whole the reports indicate that most programs have a well-organized set of appropriate outcomes that communicate the key knowledge, skills, and values students learn in the program. The intention to assess a skill or a set of skills was stated as a focus in 75% of the reports. Intention to assess knowledge was stated in 67% of the program reports while intention to assess values was stated in 50%. Approximately 40% of the programs (e.g., Art Education, American Sign Language, Civil Engineering) set out to assess the complete set of the program learning outcomes; some programs set out to assess one or a few outcomes (e.g., Humanities and Religious Studies); two programs (Exercise Science, Ethnic Studies) stated explicitly that they had not assessed any student learning outcomes during the year for a variety of reasons.

An analysis using Spearman Rank Correlations was conducted to determine the strength of the relationship between each pairing of knowledge-based outcomes, skills, and values. Knowledge and skills correlated at .61, knowledge and values at .53, values and skills at .48. In other words, the likelihood of a program assessing some combination of knowledge and skills is slightly greater than the likelihood of a program assessing some combination of values and skills. The relatively high association between knowledge and skills together with the substantial presence of statements of intention to assess knowledge and skills (67% and 75% respectively) supports the inference that the assessment culture at Sacramento State emphasizes knowledge and skills to a greater degree than values.

This evidence indicates that for most programs and units, outcomes are referenced and used as the basis for assessments. In all cases where a program is linked to an external accrediting agency, state and national disciplinary standards have been considered in the creation of outcome statements (e.g., Liberal Studies, Nursing, School Psychology, Physical Therapy). Although occasional outcome statements do not specify how students can demonstrate their learning, most outcomes either explicitly state or clearly imply what students might do in the context of assessment. In some cases, faculty have agreed on, applied, and even refined explicit criteria statements such as rubrics (e.g., English, Public Policy, Humanities and Religious Studies, Music, Criminal Justice, and more). In fact, the presence of rubrics in the Appendices of the reports is common.

Note that the General Education program has established student learning outcomes for each of the five areas in its curriculum. However, although some program reports include a discussion of general education student learning outcomes (e.g., Humanities and Religious Studies), the General Education program did not submit an assessment report for 06-07. Note also that Sacramento State has established baccalaureate learning goals; however, program assessment outcomes did not appear to have explicit links to these outcomes. No assessment report regarding one or more baccalaureate learning outcomes was submitted.

## 2. What methods did programs use to assess these outcomes?

Each report was examined to determine how the program faculty went about the work of assessing the outcomes they stated as their intention to assess. Data collected for the purposes of this report indicated the presence or absence of a direct measure (exam, observation, written work, etc.) and an indirect measure (survey, focus group, interviews, etc.).

Direct assessment measures were referenced in 77% of the reports, a percentage that is not surprising given the emphasis on an intention to assess knowledge-based outcomes and skills. Several programs reported the use of a capstone course as the location for summative assessment with concrete plans for connecting evidence for outcomes. Economics, for example, required students to design and carry out a research project, make an oral presentation, and undergo faculty evaluation via a rubric. Social Science required pre-credential students to build a professional portfolio of work taken from the capstone course and from prior courses; note that Social Science posted a document online titled “General Portfolio Directions” for students that included information about faculty expectations, types of evidence appropriate for the portfolio, and the role of the reflective essay.

Another direct assessment method employed in several programs was the use of an exam. The Division of Nursing, for example, reported on its on-going work to improve the pass rates of its students on the national licensure exam for registered nurses (NCLEX). To contextualize its assessment work, the Division couples NCLEX data with data collected from focus groups held at selected agencies where Sacramento State graduates are employed. School Psychology reported its use of the Praxis Test in School Psychology, a measurement which provides information about student learning in the areas of diagnosis and fact finding, prevention and intervention, applied psychological foundations, applied educational foundations, and ethical and legal considerations. Government reported that in spring 2007 the GOVT assessment quiz was

administered in four randomly chosen sections; this quiz consisted of multiple-choice questions designed to assess the appropriate General Education outcomes.

A variety of other direct methods was reported. The assessment of pieces of student writing was a commonly reported method. Art History, for example, reported their assessment of how well students are thinking critically, engaging in research, and writing academic papers in the final semester of the concentration. In spring 2007 the Division of Criminal Justice administered an assessment exam which it began using in 2004 consisting of multiple choice questions and a written essay; the exam was given to pre-major students and to graduating seniors in a capstone course with the intention of measuring “value added.” Some programs reported the use of observational methods. The Division of Social Work (graduate level), for example, requires its students to experience approximately 1,300 hours of field work and has developed a sophisticated and reliable method for supervisors to capture their judgments of student performance on a variety of outcomes, including values-based outcomes.

Institutions that are relatively immature in terms of their assessment development often assess outcomes principally using surveys and other methods of self-report. In the case of Sacramento State during the 06-07 year, however, indirect methods were reported in just 48% of the reports; recall that 77% reported using a direct method. In fact, in almost all cases the use of an indirect measure appeared together with the use of a direct measure; in just three reports were indirect measures the sole method. In one of these cases (Ethnic Studies) the indirect measure was a survey, which asked students to report their perceptions of their levels of strength with regard to each of the programs learning outcomes. Psychology reported on a survey of alumni and provided a remarkably detailed account of the structure of the survey and its relationship to the department mission and to the full range of learning outcomes.

### 3. What findings did the reports summarize?

Each of the reports was examined to determine whether the report included a summary of the findings from whatever assessment methods were used. In 54% of the documents findings were either summarized within the body of the report or included in an Appendix. In the Psychology report which discussed whether students are meeting learning goals after they graduate from the program via a survey of alumni, for example, findings included not only detailed information about student perceptions of how well they learned to conduct searches of the literature, make oral presentations, and the like, but also information about the return rate of the survey, the ethnicity of the sample, whether the respondents had gone on to complete the MA degree, and so on.

It would be a mistake to conclude that 06-07 reports without findings regarding student learning indicate a lack of assessment activity. Sometimes program reports did not include 06-07 findings because at the time of report writing the findings were not yet available. In Civil Engineering, for example, where the complete set of learning outcomes had been assessed using a variety of methods, the faculty had not assembled any findings but reported a plan to assemble them in time for the summer faculty retreat at the start of the following semester. The 06-07 report *did* include a discussion of findings regarding problems with retention, which had appeared in the previous year (05-06).

Sometimes reports without findings came about because the program faculty had concluded that there was a need to first revise and repair the assessment plan so that better findings might be the future yield. In essence, the relatively low percentage of reports with findings presented sometimes indicates an intense focus on assessment activity. In Mechanical Engineering, for example, the following comment appeared: “The assessment plan is currently under revision. It was found that the number of learning outcomes made it difficult to assess what is truly important for our students and for industry in general. In addition, the basic assessment plan had no clear method for closing the loop to correct perceived problems.” Exercise Science reported a similar phenomenon.

#### 4. Did the reports provide a summary of how the faculty analyzed, discussed, and interpreted the findings?

Although most of the reports indeed provided information about how faculty interpret information about teaching and learning in their programs, for purposes of this analysis the substance of the interpretation needed to be related to the substance of the current findings. Given that only 54% of the reports included a summary of findings for reasons discussed under question 3 above, it is not surprising that just 52% included a summary of how the faculty interpreted 06-07 findings.

An example of the kinds of interpretation faculty engage in appeared in the Learning Skills Center report. This program is charged with supporting students who enroll in the university without sufficient skills in English and math. These students take a variety of exams, but the faculty also uses a portfolio strategy, and the fulltime faculty meets on a weekly basis to discuss ongoing course assessment findings. The 06-07 report included the following example of interpretation: “The writing coordinators [were] concerned that the written exams of students suggest that they and their instructors are placing too much emphasis on incorporating text in their writing. The result is that independent thinking and personal voice are too often replaced by an over-dependence on the readings that are provided to students on the assigned topic.” This interpretation of findings lead to an action: “In Fall 2007 a group of instructors representing all three courses... will pilot exams where students will not be allowed to have the readings. Instead, they will be allowed to bring and refer to a study guide that they have created based on a close reading of the texts.”

#### 5. What curricular and/or instructional actions did programs plan to take in response to their interpretations?

In order for a report to be counted as including a curricular and/or instructional action plan in response to an interpretation of findings, connections among the 06-07 findings, the interpretation, and the action had to be clearly stated or implied. Applying this standard yielded the finding that 48% of the reports discussed such a planned action. Many reports not included among this 48% did discuss an action, but in many cases the action involved either interpreting data from the 05-06 year or focusing on rebuilding or revising an assessment plan as discussed earlier. For example, in 05-06 the English Department had assessed student essays written in two of their courses and had concluded that “students were successful at close readings of primary

texts but struggled with analyzing and integrating secondary sources and writing complex arguments.” Based on this analysis, the Writing Assessment Committee began collecting course syllabi, rubrics, and writing assignments and planned to start work on a website for course instructors to share ideas for writing assignments and activities.

The American Sign Language and Deaf Studies report discussed a major curricular action plan that came about as a result of assessment work during 06-07. This program stated as its primary goal the production of students with high Intermediate to beginning Advanced levels of communicative competency in American Sign Language. This level of competency is demonstrated when students complete a fourth semester course in ASL with a grade of C or better and pass a diagnostic interview called the “American Sign Language Proficiency Interview” (ASLP) with a score of 2+ out of 5, the score a native speaker would achieve. During the 06-07 year eleven students took the ASLP with a success rate of 63%. Although this pass rate is acceptable, the faculty decided to make no changes to its program. But to enhance the potential of greater success in the future, the program has developed a plan for an Undergraduate Major degree in Deaf Studies. According to the report, “components of this Major will address the students’ need for development of their skills in classifiers, ASL narratives, grammatical structures, among other areas. It is expected that students will exhibit stronger skills in these areas... and is reasonable to hypothesize that a higher percentage of students will pass the ASLPI once this coursework is in place.”

#### 6. Did the programs plan to monitor the effects of these actions?

To count as a report with a plan to monitor the effects of actions, the report needed to provide specific information about how the specific action or actions discussed would be monitored. A total of 31% of the programs stated explicit plans to monitor the effects of curricular and instructional actions. Many of the reports that fall within the 69% without such a plan did state a commitment to continue assessment work; however, the link between a particular action and a particular plan to monitor was not always made.

The Philosophy Major report, for example, indicated a heavy emphasis on monitoring curricular and instructional actions in the future, but the plan for monitoring could not be linked back to a particular action or specific learning outcome(s). In this report the following monitoring strategy is recommended: “The Assessment Committee recommends that the practice of standardized assessment tests be discontinued and supplanted with an Assessment Committee review of course materials.” The report further stated the following: “All faculty members should be required to submit, at the end of each semester, and in one electronic document (Tests, quizzes, study questions, midterms, final) all evaluation tools used during the semester for each GE course taught.”

An example of a report that included a monitoring strategy is found in the Business Management 06-07 report. In an Improvement Plan for Outcome BSBA3.2, an outcome with several quite specific parts to it, created by the Finance Area subcommittee, the action was to “adopt a common set of finance questions and problems.” The subcommittee asked all instructors of FIN 101 to implement this common material during Fall 07; the plan to monitor was as follows: “Some quizzes common across all sections will be adopted on a provisional basis.”

7. Did the programs implement any action plans that came about as a result of engagement in assessment activity?

This analysis of the 06-07 reports identified two program reports in which curricular and instructional action plans explicitly linked to particular assessment data had been clearly, fully, and purposefully implemented. Said differently, 4% of the program reports included evidence that this phenomenon had occurred in a deep and meaningful way. Although several other program reports did discuss action plans that had been implemented, the level of implementation and the strength of the relationship between assessment data and implementation in these other program reports appeared categorically different from the two reports comprising the 4% group. These reports were as follows: Business Management and Nursing.

The Division of Nursing reported that since 2003 a central focus of the Division has been the improvement of pass rates for students on the national licensure examination for registered nurses (NCLEX). During these years the Division implemented a series of strategies to accomplish this goal, including implementing a testing “gate” for students that requires a benchmark score on an NCLEX-like exam for passing on to the next semester. In 2004 the Division discovered that the pass rate for ESL students was 20% below that for native English speakers; it implemented a plan of action funded through Ed Equity that provided sufficient faculty resources to hold study sessions with ESL learners on taking NCLEX style exams.

The Division of Nursing also collected indirect evidence by way of student surveys, exit interviews, and focus groups involving students and employers. Qualitative analysis of data from these assessments produced a wealth of insights into curriculum and instruction, including items like “students focused on machines and tasks” in the field instead of on patients, students “appreciated interview process in pediatrics,” and “more content about AIDS, hospice, diabetes, and delegation desired.” The 06-07 report discussed a range of specific action plans that had been implemented. For example, in response to data collected that indicated redundancy and overlap in the courses, the following action was implemented: “One course, N155, was deleted from the curriculum and the content was absorbed into a companion course, thus reducing redundancy and decreasing overall units to graduation.”

The College of Business Administration adopted the assurance of learning plan proposed by its external accrediting agency, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), some time ago. In 1991 AACSB introduced the concept of “outcomes assessment” in its accreditation standards; during this iteration schools of business were allowed considerable flexibility in assessment strategies in that indirect measures like surveys of alumni or employers were deemed acceptable. In 2003 AACSB changed its standards in ways congruent with national assessment evolutionary forces and expected schools to create clear learning outcomes with appropriate direct assessments to improve curricula.

According to the Business Management 06-07 report, the College was involved in the implementation of phases 3 and 4 of the assurance of learning plan during that year. Phases 3 and 4 entail the analysis and interpretation of data collected from direct and indirect measures, the determination of whether long-term assessment standards have been met, the development of

improvement practices based on the analysis, and the implementation of these improvement practices.

In the College of Business Administration area assessment committees developed assessments and rubrics for all learning outcomes in 04-05. During the 05-06 year outcomes were assessed, and areas in need of improvement were identified as follows: team membership skills, quantitative analysis, financial quantitative analysis, and ethical decision making. In the fall of 2006 areas developed action plans, and in the spring of 2007 the faculty implemented the plans. Additional action plans were implemented in the fall of 2007 and will be discussed in next year's assessment report.

## SECTION TWO: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

At a purely quantitative level this analysis suggests increased “engagement in assessment” across the campus. Given that the 05-06 report total was 17, i.e., just 17 departments submitted reports the year before the report collection examined in this paper, the current total of 40 reports indicates a considerable increase in effort expended in the area of assessment—at least in terms of assessment reporting. Said differently, the change from 31% of departmental report submissions in 05-06 to 75% of departmental report submissions in 06-07 can be interpreted to represent an increase in engagement in assessment activity.

This increase in the number of reports available for analysis provides a bit of a foundation for generalizing across the university with a caveat. Clearly, the absence of 25% of the departmental reports is a serious matter and needs to change; without these reports it is impossible to document whether useful and responsible assessment is taking place in these departments. In essence, the findings in this paper apply to just 75% of the institution. However, because the level of engagement has increased and has afforded an analysis like the one presented in this paper, the university is positioning itself to improve its own organizational learning. For example, with papers such as this one available to the Deans and to the faculty, cross-College and cross-department dialogue about effective and efficient assessment practices can be stimulated. Even if the findings above are not completely accurate across all programs, they are accurate enough to serve as the basis for local discussions.

One such finding that could propel faculty reflection is the relative institutional emphasis on assessment of knowledge and skills in contrast to values. This finding might stimulate program area groups to revisit its set of student learning outcomes with an eye on establishing a multi-year assessment plan that ensures coverage of all of the outcomes over time. Also, 40% of the program reports indicated that the faculty intended to assess all of the program outcomes during the 06-07 year. The question of complete assessment of all outcomes every year vs. targeted assessment of fewer outcomes could provide the basis for local discussions. In part, complete assessment is tied to assessment method in important ways, e.g. capstone assessment by design affords complex, multifaceted assessment of learning.

The absence of an assessment report from General Education and the lack of clear links among program student learning outcomes and baccalaureate learning goals cry out for contextualizing. To be sure, not all faculty may even be aware of the existence of baccalaureate goals at this

point, but the assessment leadership is aware, especially as these goals intersect with General Education goals. The Associate Dean for General Education is committed to finding ways to discern and inform connections among real student learning and important general goals; the Senate recognizes the serious edge to this question at the bachelor's degree level.

The Provost's Advisory Committee on Assessment, an ad hoc committee constituted in spring 2007, recently recommended to the Provost that the General Education committee establish a cycle of assessment wherein particular outcomes are measured during particular years using a random sampling strategy. Other opportunities are emerging as well for assessment of the BA goals—evidence from the Graduate Writing Assessment Requirement, simplified electronic reporting options for programs, focused studies in the Office of Academic Program Assessment.

Program faculty could further this work by creating curriculum maps to show how their program outcomes link with the baccalaureate learning outcomes. A strategy of random sampling like that employed in General Education across all baccalaureate programs might be undertaken during the 08-09 year to build on what is learned from the General Education experience. This assessment project might focus on one or a few of the BA goals.

It is encouraging to note that 77% of the reports discussed the use of a direct measure of student learning. As noted earlier, institutions just getting started with assessment often rely heavily on indirect measures such as satisfaction surveys or exit interviews. This set of reports, however, evidences not just an emphasis on direct measures, but also a range of experience with a spectrum of powerful direct assessment strategies. Many reports describe uses of capstone courses, portfolios, observational tools, licensure exams, performances, and more—the institution could take inventory of these methods and establish collaborative structures that permit cross-program communication for organizational learning.

Although direct assessment is emphasized, the program reports also indicate that faculty groups are using indirect measures as well with 48% of the reports commenting that they do. Moreover, several examples of reports indicate that these indirect measures have provided information useful in creating action plans for program improvement. Consolidating and centralizing technologies associated with indirect data collection and analysis could be considered at the institutional level to maximize the use of these assessment tools. In addition, because many programs indicated the use of exit interviews and focus groups, an organized technology for conducting analysis of qualitative data could facilitate this strategy.

Slightly more the half of the reports included a summary of assessment findings or a complete set of findings in an Appendix that could be linked to the intended outcome and method for data collection. Related to this item, just over half of the reports summarized faculty interpretation of the findings. At first glance this situation could be cause for concern, but on closer inspection it is evidence that in many cases where findings are absent, the program faculty were engaged in some other critical activity related to assessment. For example, several programs expressed dissatisfaction with an assessment strategy previously used and were building a new one; other programs were revising their learning outcomes or attending to the revision of their assessment plan. That over half of the reports were able to report relevant findings given the transitional period our institution is experiencing can be interpreted as a very good sign indeed.

Just under half of the reports discussed an action plan in response to faculty interpretation of findings, but this item must also be interpreted in light of the transitional status of the institution. As stated earlier, most reports did indeed report an action plan, but the plan focused on rebuilding the assessment system in some way, or the plan was connected to data that had been collected during the previous year. It may be that the Senate in collaboration with Academic Affairs needs to clarify its expectations for annual assessment for the program area groups and state explicitly that action plans for the upcoming year must be rooted firmly in assessment findings from the current year. Such a policy encourages a multiyear plan.

Core elements in “closing the loop,” i.e., plans to monitor action plans for effectiveness and evidence of the actual implementation of action plans, remain a challenge for the institution with just one-third of the reports providing clear plans to monitor and just 4% of the reports discussing in depth the implementation of a previous year’s action plan. What sticks out from the findings in the 4% reports is the historical influence of an external accrediting body linked to industry. As the institution develops its effectiveness with assessment over the next few years, “closing the loop” items are items to target for evidence of organizational learning in every College and department.