

A WINDOW ON ASSESSMENT



SACRAMENTO STATE
Leadership begins here.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO OFFICE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

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Office of Academic Program Assessment

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Wednesday: 10:00 – 1:00
Thursday: 9:00 – 2:00
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New Assessment Office Opens

For the first time in the history of this campus a new office has been opened that is exclusively dedicated to Academic Program Assessment. It is a service of the Office of Academic Affairs designed to strengthen and enhance assessment of student learning outcomes. Other changes to strengthen assessment efforts include: Establishment of the Provost Advisory Council on Assessment (chaired by Professor Cathi Christo, Education); university coordination of efforts by Academic Affairs supervised by Don Taylor, Director of Academic Planning and Quality and Mike Lee, Associate Vice President, Leadership role by college Deans in facilitating assessment processes in their colleges, the appointment of Terry Underwood, Faculty Assessment Coordinator to offer expert guidance to departments, and embedding assessment as a core element in department program reviews.

Teaching and Learning Outside the Matrix

Terry Underwood, Faculty Assessment Coordinator

"Can you tell me what students learn in your course?" a visitor asked a professor.

"Absolutely," the professor replied. He produced a syllabus with learning goals, assignments, grading policies, readings, a calendar of activities, and more. The organization and clarity were impeccable, and the professor spoke eloquently about student learning.

"Great! Now, can you tell me what students learn in your program?" the visitor asked.

"This information is in the syllabus as well," the professor said. "Do you see those letters and numbers in parentheses? They index our program goals. My course is aligned. I'm in the matrix."

"I see," said the visitor. "But what do those numbers mean? Can you tell me what knowledge base your students build over the time they spend with you and your colleagues? What skill sets they develop? What ways of thinking and knowing they practice? What they come to value? What they are able to do?" the visitor asked. "And how well do they learn these things? And perhaps you can tell me *how you know* what they are learning?"

"Oh," the professor replied, shaken a bit by the visitor's persistence. "Check with my department chair. She answers questions like these. She has to write a report each year for somebody across campus..."

Whether this professor exists is less important than the fact that such a visitor does. WASC, the body that warrants for the public our worth as an institution of higher learning,

arrives in spring 2009 to ask questions about student learning. The only wrong answer is this: We don't know what our students are, or are not, learning.

Last July, WASC postponed its visit to give us time to prepare. Provost Sheley published the following statement: "The Commission

identified several items that will require urgent, immediate, and sustained efforts to embed strategic and effective practices and policies into program assessments of student learning and to use the results of these assessments to inform University planning and budgeting decisions."

WASC acknowledged the work we have done but characterized our development as "uneven." We have a short timeline to even things

out. The Office of Academic Program Assessment (OAPA) has opened this semester to support campus-wide program assessment and to provide a hands-on resource to faculty.

This inaugural issue of *A Window on Assessment* argues that we have begun. It includes information about how to self-assess at the program level. It provides a glimpse into how assessment is becoming integral to program review work on campus. It showcases the work being done by the Senate Subcommittee for Writing and Reading, the GEAR Coordinator, and the English Department to build a better writing assessment system. We have an opportunity to grow as an institution and to renew the public's trust. Let us take advantage of this opportunity with an appropriate sense of urgency.

“ WASC acknowledged the work we have done but characterized our development as ‘uneven.’ ”



TERRY UNDERWOOD

A Strategy for Self-Assessing the State of your Program Assessment System

Terry Underwood, Professor, Department of Teacher Education

Program assessment begins with a plan or system that engages faculty in two cycles of activity: 1) regular examinations of student work and student perceptions which lead to program improvement and 2) annual reporting of findings as well as accounts of program improvements. The following guiding questions can be applied to individual systems as a heuristic to ensure that all systems function.

How clear and complete are the student learning outcomes? Clear statements specify the a) knowledge base, b) skill sets, c) ways of thinking or knowing, d) communication or interaction competencies, and e) values and beliefs students are expected to carry away from the program. A complete set of outcomes addresses all or most of these aspects of learning. These outcomes are central to all assessment and program planning and inform policies and practices ranging from admission to follow-up surveys. In the absence of clear and complete learning outcomes, assessment is not possible.

What direct measures of learning are used? Direct measures include projects, papers, performances, exams, and the like which demonstrate what students know and can do. Clearly connected to one or more outcomes, these measures include rubrics or other means to establish degrees of learning. In many programs faculty identify particular assignments within courses to use as the basis for a direct measure. In some programs externally designed exams aligned with licensure or professional credential are available. Note that direct measures can be examined qualitatively or quantitatively or both.

What indirect measures of learning or the conditions in which learning occurs are used? Indirect measures include student satisfaction surveys, focus groups, interviews, written commentary, and the like. These measures illuminate student perceptions that often inform interpretations of findings from direct measures. Student survey work can be accomplished within the program or department; the Office of Institutional Research is also involved in survey work and can be used as a resource. Follow-up surveys of graduates after they leave the program often provide valuable information for program improvement.

What regular activities are implemented to engage faculty in data analysis, interpretation, and application? Faculty can examine direct measures collaboratively to produce judgments about learning, or faculty can apply a rubric individually to student work and then bring a summary of their judgments to a meeting. Some programs discuss samples of student work

from early, middle, and late in a program to learn about student growth over time. Several programs on campus are using a portfolio strategy and are interested in exploring ways in which technology can enhance collection and analysis. Indirect measures can shine a light on student perceptions of opportunities to learn and their level of satisfaction with current practices. Decisions about how to stage learning activities across a sequence of courses, the actual sequence of courses, and the content and approach to individual courses should be made based upon faculty engagement in application of findings.

What policies and practices are in place to ensure that reporting is accomplished efficiently and effectively? Whether done as a part of self-study and program review within a department or as a partner in institutional-level accreditation work, reporting and communication are critical aspects of assessment. Reporting includes a discussion not just of the findings of assessment, but also an account of curricular or instructional decisions made as a result. Requests for resources, new course proposals, and program changes are more effectively made when they are grounded in an assessment report. A template for yearly reporting is available on the Academic Affairs website.

Assessment traps can derail activity within a program. Vague or overly complex learning outcomes lead to problems in measurement; large numbers of outcomes result in overbuilt and underused systems. Direct measurements can be cumbersome or inappropriate; often, the most effective and efficient measurement tools already exist within the courses with some refinement. Indirect measurements can take time and must be handled with care so that they do not become individual teaching evaluations. Faculty engagement in analysis, interpretation, and use takes time and presents risks as well as deep concerns about loss of academic freedom. Faculty groups must be proactive and discuss these issues and reach agreements about how to minimize potential problems. Reporting requires resources, coordination, and planning.

The Office of Academic Program Assessment was created and resourced specifically to provide support to programs and to department chairs and College deans so that assessment work can be done. One way to use this resource is to set up a time where program faculty can discuss these self-assessment questions with the faculty assessment coordinator as facilitator, consultant, or sounding board.

Moving from Testing to Teaching: The New GWAR

Fiona Glade, Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement and

Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator

The Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE) was established in 1977 in response to the CSU Chancellor and Board of Trustees' call for a Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) at each CSU campus by which all student writers should "demonstrate their competency with regard to writing skills as a requirement for graduation." There's no mandate for how to administer the requirement; as such, each campus designed a GWAR instrument—or set of instruments—that is suitable to local needs. The call does, nonetheless, emphasize the following points: student writing skills are an all-campus responsibility, students should meet the GWAR before senior year, and individual campuses have the freedom to implement the requirement in a number of ways.

At Sacramento State, the GWAR has consisted of a timed Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE) in which writers read a passage and write an argumentative essay responding to a prompt. Students who fail the WPE twice are guided into English 109W (native writers of English) or English 109M (multilingual writers), where they may meet the GWAR either by passing a WPE around midterm, or by submitting a passing portfolio—rated by at least two scorers—at semester end. While the WPE is an internal assessment and as such is not necessarily a high stakes assessment for our campus, it is most decidedly a high stakes assessment for each student.

In **Writing Assessment: A Position Statement**, The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)—the main professional body of college writing—states that "writing assessment is useful primarily as a means of improving learning" and that "any individual's writing 'ability' is a sum or a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts" (March 1995). As such, CCCC suggests that:

Assessments of written literacy should be designed and evaluated by well-informed current or future teachers of the students being assessed, for purposes clearly understood by all the participants; should elicit from student writers a variety of pieces, preferably over a period of time; should encourage and reinforce good teaching practices; and should be solidly grounded in the latest research on language learning.

The GWAR, as one of the primary internal assessment tools on our campus, offers an opportunity for

assessment that sustains useful links with instruction. The upcoming changes to the GWAR reflect that important link between ongoing assessment and instruction.

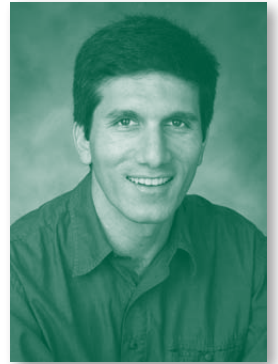
Within the new Comprehensive Writing Program sequence approved by the Faculty Senate and the President, the GWAR holds an important place. Under the new procedure, which will be implemented in Fall 2009, students will be able to choose between taking the course and taking the timed essay exam. The timed essay (formerly the WPE) will be the WPJ—the Writing Placement for Juniors. The course will be, for the vast majority of students, either English 109W or English 109M. Whichever option they select, students will subsequently receive a placement into their upper-division writing intensive coursework: *either* their timed essay *or* their English 109 portfolio will determine that placement.

The 109 portfolios will continue to be rated by English 109 faculty, while the WPJ exams will still be scored by trained faculty from across the disciplines at Sacramento State and local community colleges. Placements range from 3 units to more than 6 units of coursework. A 3 unit placement means that the writer is ready to move straight into the upper-division writing intensive course recommended by her or his major department. A 4 unit placement means that the writer needs some additional assistance in order to succeed in the writing intensive course recommended by the major department, so is required to concurrently enroll in a single-unit pass/fall adjunct writing tutorial. A 6 unit placement means that this writer is not yet ready to succeed in the upper-division writing intensive course, so is required to take, or retake, English 109W/M as a prerequisite.

Completion of that upper-division writing intensive coursework with a passing grade will certify the GWAR. In keeping with national best practices in writing assessment, the change means that this high stakes assessment for students will be more authentic and valid, made by faculty experts throughout the disciplines who teach writing intensive courses—they will be assessing their own students' abilities to write and revise a variety of assignments in the usual instructional setting. The most effective assessment practices, like the changes to the GWAR, both link to and transform instruction and curriculum.



FIONA GLADE



DAN MELZER

The Promise of Self-Study

Jackie R. Donath, Chair, Department of Humanities and Religious Studies

“In a university committed to the success of all students, how can we meet the increasing pressures for accountability while remaining true to the foundational values of our departmental culture?”

In December 2007, Gerald Graff, president of the Modern Language Association and professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, delivered a paper and described himself as a “believer in the potential of learning outcomes assessment” as an effort to articulate “what we expect our students to learn—all of them, not just the high achieving few—then holds us accountable for helping them learn it.” Graff’s changing views on assessment resonated for me as a teacher and as the chair of the Department of Humanities and Religious Studies.

Its celebration of what Graff called “virtuoso performance by soloists” drew me to my department in 1991. I wanted to teach where a well-prepared and well-executed lecture was a work of art. However, this department, which has always been wary of institutionally-mandated assessment activities and has constructed its curriculum on prerogatives of individual practitioners, now finds itself in a dilemma. In a university committed to the success of all students, how can we meet the increasing pressures for accountability while remaining true to the foundational values of our departmental culture?

One answer may lie in the self-study and program review process, which is changing as part of an initiative from the Program Review Oversight Committee and the University Curriculum Policies Committee. In the past, the self-study was often the responsibility of the department chair or whatever hapless colleague s/he could deputize. The study’s author followed a template, gathered data, and responded in isolation to questions asked of all departments. “Good” department chairs spared colleagues from having to spend much time on the project. The result was self-studies and program reviews in which time (and paper) was frittered away filling in blanks, providing information of dubious meaningfulness to anyone, and which often only tangentially discussed student learning in meaningful or direct ways.

My department is piloting a self-study approach whose goal is to identify how the program review process can facilitate faculty reflection on and engagement with issues of educational effectiveness. The new process has involved us in conversations about the sorts of research questions we might examine and the issues we might engage to define and examine our enterprise. In doing so, the department

is already beginning to benefit from a recognition that in order to decide what we want our students to learn, and to find out whether they (and we) are meeting our goals, we must think together about our teaching and our students’ learning.

The more public, collaborative and consultative set of practices which our self-study is requiring has the potential to move us beyond a model of education in which we teach our courses however we think best (or in whatever ways please us) as individual instructors. Courses taught in isolation, no matter how skillful the instruction, can not be understood to be a program. What makes a program is discussion about and revelation of the content, skills and ways of thinking that we intend all of our students to carry away from all of our classes.

Of course, shifting from an independent, discrete, almost entrepreneurial, instructor-based curriculum to a more cooperative, programmatic, student-learning focus represents both promise and risk. One significant risk we must recognize is the potential vulnerability of faculty. Although we correctly want to focus on our students as we develop and evaluate student learning outcomes, it would be disingenuous to ignore the reality that, ultimately, faculty performance is a consideration in such evaluations. It is certainly understandable, given the psychology of many of us in this profession, that increased scrutiny and surveillance is not something we welcome.

However, even at the basic level at which the department has begun exploring and exposing our efforts in our classrooms as part of our self-study, it is clear our efforts will ultimately have a beneficial effect—for our program, our colleagues, our students and the citizens of the state whose taxes support us.

We know that what we do can be transformative, is important and provides our students with critical skills and ways of thinking that will improve both individual lives and the world at large. We need to make that argument in ways that are as powerful, transparent and understandable as possible. It may be that a revised system of self-study and program review will offer us that opportunity.

[the full text of Gerald Graff’s paper appears on the MLA website at www.mla.org/fromthepres]