

A WINDOW ON ASSESSMENT



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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO OFFICE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Responsibility, Rewards, Resources, Resistance

Terry Underwood, Faculty Assessment Coordinator



TERRY UNDERWOOD

Some time ago, near the end of an assessment conference with my brain on overload, I attended a workshop on strategies for getting professors engaged in program assessment.

At some point,

the presenter talked about “the four R’s of faculty involvement.” Weeks later I happened upon a quickly jotted-down note and spotted this nugget.

I wish I could remember the name of the presenter and the assessment scholar the presenter drew from—I would love to cite the source. Unfortunately, I cannot, but I can discuss the R’s and tell why I think the articles in this issue help us all see clearly why faculty should get and are getting engaged in assessment.

Robby Ching’s assessment work in the Learning Skills Center highlights the first R, **Responsibility**. The assessment work that Robby and the Learning Skills faculty did in articulating a crucial learning outcome, studying student work and then refining instruction shows a deep sense of professional responsibility to students. As Robby will tell you, her interest in assessment comes not from external threat or administrative pressure but from a commitment to students. Robby has been quietly doing quality, meaningful assessment for many years, work that has only recently drawn the local attention it

deserves, though beyond the campus she has been acknowledged.

Jana Noel’s assessment initiative in the area of community engagement exemplifies the second R, **Rewards**. To be sure, responsible professors reap internal rewards through making a contribution to students, but as Jana tells us, assessment work can also lead to greater program visibility. Sacramento State has been honored for its efforts in community engagement; assessment of the benefits of community engagement for students will lead to even greater recognition and ultimately to the biggest reward of all: the chance to contribute to the emerging research into how post-secondary institutions can make life better for our communities while improving learning for students.

Bruce Bikle’s discussion of General

“I hope this newsletter opens up ways for... faculty to reconsider assessment.”

Education and assessment redefines the third R, **Resources**. Ordinarily, when professors talk about the need for resources, they are speaking about new money. Bruce changes the dynamics of the discussion. In his piece Bruce focuses not on what we could do if we had more resources; instead, his focus is on what we can do with the resources we have. What would happen if we seriously gathered

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data, made curricular experiments, did research into student learning—and then made plans? In this view assessment becomes a vehicle for making better use of what we have to accomplish the core goal of the institution, i.e., student learning.

The last R, **Resistance**, is complex. Professors with antipathy toward assessment might think about the other R’s—responsibility, rewards, and resources. I hope this newsletter opens up ways for such faculty to reconsider assessment. Professors who see assessment as hoop-jumping, time drains, useless paper pushing, etc., might think about whether what they have been doing is really assessment at all. Anyone would resist mindless, useless time sucks. But who among us would resist fulfilling our professional responsibilities, seeking meaningful rewards that enrich our work and our world, finding better ways to plan that maximize our use of resources? To me, these three R’s are what assessment is all about.

General Education: The Center of Our Undergraduate Curriculum?

By Bruce Bikle, Chair, Faculty Senate



BRUCE BIKLE

Historically, American universities have stressed a major as the important “take away” from the undergraduate curriculum. Sacramento State has seen a proliferation of majors, often discrete and “siloeed,” with varied price tags that create internal competition for funds. We have turned General Education into a “cash cow” to subsidize the “important work” of the majors while paying lip service to the notion of a “general” education. The result, in my view, is a disjointed General Education program that, while offering many interesting courses, is but loosely tied to the broad Baccalaureate Learning Goals (BALGs) our Senate ratified almost 10 years ago.

Times, as they say, “are a changing.” Circumstances have forced us to revisit our BALGs to see if we are achieving them. Unfortunately, assessment of student learning at the institutional level has not evolved to the point where we can answer with any certainty. Too, the AAC&U’s initiative “Liberal Education and America’s Promise” (LEAP) has challenged us to produce student outcomes that prepare our graduates for a future that demands a broad education. Generally, the BALGs and LEAP stress argumentation and critical thinking, written and oral communication, respect for diversity, information competence—in more simple terms, what we used to call a Liberal Education.

Given our funding situation, I am the first to say that we are inadequately funded. However, the changes we need to make in General Education may not require more funding, but rather changes in how we think about our programs. We might ask: “What can we do well with what we have?” Or put another way: “What could we do better with what we have?”

We teach three kinds of undergraduate students whether they come first year or transfer. Category 1 seeks a specific credential, a ticket to a job. For them, the curriculum (e.g. Nursing and Engineering) offers little flexibility. Category 2 seeks a given career and major that may not be required for an entry level position but is a plus; they often seek advancement to a graduate program as well. Criminal Justice and Business Administration are examples. Category 3—by far our largest group—seeks an education to assist them after graduation in ways not entirely clear at the moment. While we graduate students in Sociology and Psychology and English and Communication Studies, we don’t call them sociologists or psychologists by virtue of their BA/BS. Academic titles such as these are reserved for those with advanced degrees.

What if Sacramento State had several General Education/Liberal Arts options tailored for various majors or clusters of majors like the colleges at UC San Diego? This would allow for articulation between the GE/LA and the needs of the majors as appropriate.

What if we took this opportunity to take seriously LEAP’s call for truly liberally educated undergraduates? What if the students in Categories 2 and 3 were given a broad GE/LA program: interdisciplinary, coherent, and targeted at the goals of the BALGs and LEAP outcomes?

What if General Education WERE the University’s first priority and the actual “major” were secondary for Category 2 and 3 students?

What if the rewards and standards (read RTP here) for teaching and classroom activity for faculty were tilted toward the GE/LA model as opposed to the departmental major model?

What if funding went first to the GE/LA, then to majors?

What if we were able to draw down the number of credits in the major and bring up exposure to GE/LA courses in the 120 credit mix?

What if our smaller classes were used for the GE/LA, particularly at the lower division level courses, while major courses were larger? There is an intense need to develop skills such as writing, argumentation, numeracy, critical thinking, etc., given the number of underprepared students we take in; smaller classes with more attention seem to have merit. If students “got” these skills in lower division courses, perhaps many preparation issues could be solved before upper division.

What if Sacramento State encouraged high school graduates to come to us for the whole undergrad experience? If we were successful at attracting a LOT of freshmen, we might be more selective with the transfer students, and thus pressure the community colleges to emulate the delivery of a quality GE/LA transfer program.

Answers to these questions are not readily available at this time, but the data gathering, the assessment of current programs and experimental curricular projects, and the research and the planning could be done—if we were brave enough to do so. Resistance to change along the lines these questions imply cannot be chalked up to funding problems. None of these discussions and the changes coming from them

“What if General Education was the first priority of the University and the actual ‘major’ was secondary...?”

would cost another dime.

Assessment As a Process

By Robby Ching, Chair, Learning Skills Center



ROBBY CHING

Faculty at Sacramento State are coming to understand that assessment is not a bureaucratic hoop to be jumped through every June, but rather—as assessment advocates have told us all along—a way to improve our teaching and our students’ learning. Assessment is an opportunity to explain our objectives and demonstrate the degree to which our students meet them. It is

also a process that enables us to examine our students’ work and to experiment with ways to help them better achieve our objectives.

The overarching goal that drives the reading/writing curriculum in the Learning Skills Center is the need to prepare students to read expository texts analytically and construct rhetorically effective arguments in response. We have refined this goal in a set of specific outcomes based on what we observe students are able to do at the end of our courses. A year ago we selected a single outcome to focus on initially in our assessment process: Students will be able to “integrate well-chosen source material into texts through accurate and effective use of quotation, paraphrase, and/or summary.”

We are now gathering evidence in order to document the degree to which our students meet this outcome. We cannot simply cite grades because that would be circular: students can do it because we say they can do it. We have to show that they can do it by providing evidence from student work. Our plan this semester is to use student portfolios, which are already required in the classes and contain work evaluated by someone other than the student’s teacher, to provide the evidence. We will select strong, adequate, and weak portfolios and locate writing that shows the degree to which students have achieved the ability to support their arguments effectively using the texts of others.

Assessment leads naturally to faculty inquiry. In fall 2007 we began by looking at the problems that students encountered when they tried to support their arguments with the texts of others: They read superficially or misunderstood what they read, they failed to select the best evidence, they lost their own voice in an overreliance on the texts of others, and they

failed to provide context for quotes and analysis of their significance. Having identified these problems, we began an experiment to find out if we could improve students’ performance. We provided students with multiple articles on a topic in advance of the exam and required students to use structured note-taking as they read; they then could bring their notes to the exam but not the readings. We piloted the note-taking in selected sections, graded the student writing separately, surveyed the students for their reactions, and evaluated the results. Our conclusion was that the new process created opportunities for a higher level of interaction with the readings, although not all students, of course, took advantage of this opportunity. Nevertheless, we saw enough improvement to decide to continue using structured note-taking in our higher level classes.

Finally, assessment is an opportunity for faculty development. In order to involve all faculty in the discussion about how best to improve our students’ critical reading and writing ability, we held a faculty retreat in August. Faculty made presentations showcasing activities they had developed to sharpen students’ critical reading ability, and we brainstormed outcomes in anticipation of revising our outcomes statements. We also created a LOCUS website for faculty to share materials they developed. By the end of the fall semester, 35 items had been posted.

The Learning Skills Center offers reading/writing courses for first-year students underprepared for college level work, currently 54 percent of regularly admissible freshmen, and these students must achieve proficiency, i.e., readiness for college-level English, by the end of their first year. As a department, we are committed to ensuring that students have actually learned what we are teaching and acquired the requisite critical reading and analytical writing abilities they will need throughout their career in the University. Our assessment process enables us to do this as well as discover ways to do our work more effectively.

Instead of grumbling as I prepare this year’s assessment report, I will be happy to commend my faculty for the work they have done and the progress students have made as a result. At that point, while not abandoning our efforts to help students incorporate the texts of others, we will also begin to focus on a new objective – introducing students to more of the genres of writing that they will encounter in future university courses, in our on going effort to prepare students for the world beyond first-year composition classes.

“We cannot simply cite grades because that would be circular: Students can do it because we say they can do it.”

Creating an Assessment Framework for Community Engagement Activities

Jana Noel, Community Engagement Faculty Scholar



JANA NOEL

“... Assessment data gathered from our work in the future will be used to improve the community engagement activities of our faculty and our students...”

Sacramento State was recently informed that it has been included in the 2008 President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll by the Corporation for National and Community Service. This honor represents the University’s commitment to building strong partnerships with the community and to becoming a more active participant in the development of the Sacramento region.

While those of us involved in community engagement are honored by this recognition, and certainly believe that our efforts in connecting students with communities make a difference in the lives of both our students and those communities, we know we need to gather evidence to determine if that is truly the case, and to provide a base for future directions in the area of community engagement. The next step in the ongoing development of a strong community engagement presence at the University and within the community is the creation of a coherent assessment system for assessing student learning outcomes of such community engagement courses and projects.

Sac State has created the position of Community Engagement faculty scholar, the position I currently hold, located in the Community Engagement Center, a unit within Academic Affairs. One key responsibility of this position is to lead the efforts toward creating such an assessment plan. As the Community Engagement faculty scholar, I am working to facilitate movement toward several of the University’s core values, especially that Sac State values “community enhancing and supportive learning, scholarship, and creative activity.”

My overall work in this position aligns most clearly with the University Strategic Plan Goals No. 5 and No. 2. Strategic Plan Goal No. 2 speaks to the need to improve “evidence-based decision-making and purposeful planning.” According to goal No. 5, “We have a tremendous opportunity and the potential to be a full and active partner in regional social, cultural and economic development.” The assessment data gathered from our work in the future will be used to improve the community engagement activities of our faculty and our students, helping to ensure that student learning

outcomes are aligned not only with the goals of particular courses or programs, but also with the University’s goals at-large.

This work involves several components. First, I have worked with Terry Underwood to lay the foundation for future work and discussions around the assessment of community engagement. Second, the Community Engagement Center is creating a task force on community engagement assessment, which will have the task of creating an assessment framework to align with both University values, goals, and priorities, and the assessment strategies of community engagement programs across the state and nation. And finally, I will be working with departments and projects to create or align assessment systems to assess student learning outcomes.

The outcome of this work should provide a framework for faculty to assess the student learning outcomes of their community engagement activities. There can be no “one size fits all” assessment of an activity so complex, with so many levels of involvement, as community engagement. My purpose in creating an assessment framework is to create a framework of common goals and questions that can be used by faculty to ensure that their assessment strategies link to the purposes of community engagement at Sac State as well in the state and nation.

I look forward to working with faculty and community members in this endeavor. By creating a coherent assessment plan, we should be able to document the difference that community engagement makes in the lives of our students and faculty, the University’s direction, and the communities where we live and work. I hope that we will contribute not only to our local efforts at understanding the meaning of community engagement for students, but also to contribute to such efforts at a state and national level. I want our efforts at Sac State to be seen as a model for community engagement throughout the CSU system, the state, and the nation at-large.