Department of Environmental Studies

College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies

Assessment Report

Fall 2009 – Spring 2010
During this past academic year, department faculty spent a considerable amount of time working on the final development and approval for a new Bachelor of Science degree program. This effort also included significant changes to the existing Bachelor of Arts degree, changes to the existing Minor, and the design of seven new courses. It was a longer and more complicated process than anticipated. Much time and effort has been dedicated to moving the curriculum through the system, and the department is looking forward to final approval by the Chancellor’s Office summer 2010.

The Department has been actively engaged in discussion about assessment this entire academic year. It has been the focus of three department meetings in spring, and the department faculty even conducted an “Assessment Summit” on June 2, 2010.

At a meeting held on April 20, the faculty decided to focus department assessment attention on the following: whether and how our students are successfully becoming rigorous scientific decision makers who are critical, inferential thinkers. Faculty agreed to look at ways in which the program helps students in the following ways: think critically and inferentially, interpret data, perform experimental design and risk assessment, read quantitative literature, and write clear papers.

Professor Virginia Matzek used pre- and post-assessment tests in ENVS 112 this year. The feedback received was helpful, and the Department has decided to use pre- and post-assessment tests for all Environmental Studies major courses beginning fall 2010.

Department faculty have agreed to approach this individually by addressing how such an assessment would be written for their fall and spring classes. Part-time lecturers teach ENVS 122 and ENVS 128, so faculty will work with part-time lecturers to develop pre- and post-assessment tests for these classes. Faculty will then evaluate the results. All faculty will meet to discuss ENVS 10 and develop rudimentary questions based on the issues the department cares most about the students learning. The department will brainstorm over summer the essential general questions.

A set of pre-test questions and assessment strategy will be composed during summer, ready to go for fall. Terry Underwood and/or Amy Liu will be consulted in late summer to review the questions and provide advice.

At the beginning of each majors class in fall, students will be asked a series of questions designed to evaluate understanding of primary issues. At the end of the semester, the same test will be given. The department faculty will review the responses and determine changes in the language used, the sense of importance of the issues (such as climate change), views of the complexity of the issues, and how students think they can deal with the issues productively, if at all. Department recommendation for assessment length is half-page, 200 words.
This pre- and post-classroom learning measurement will be our primary project for next year’s assessment. We plan to utilize the newest possible research on this area of assessment. A series of small work groups will meet throughout the fall to develop the pre- and post-assessment tools. The questions will be common to all sections of the courses.

A related issue is the department’s sequencing of courses. For majors courses, it is important to know what is being learned in those courses. How does the program as a whole fit together with content and skills? We currently do not require a sequencing of courses, primarily because of transfer pressures and schedule flexibility. Some students come into the majors classes who have taken the prerequisites, others are in the class without prerequisites, or sometimes any other ENVS course.

We are struggling with how to balance program rigor with student flexibility. The Department is moving into a stage of assessment that is more than an abstract quantitative report. In doing pre- and post-assessment evaluations, the faculty will need to be cognizant of the formulation and pursuit of substantive outcome goals. It will be useful for faculty, part-time lecturers, and students to have the core concepts laid out at the beginning of the course, then threaded through the entire class, and culminating in the post-assessment evaluation.

Another specific assessment goal for next year is to revise the departmental assessment tool which is given to students during their senior thesis course. Current practice is to require seniors enrolled in that course to answer a series of fifty questions. Faculty will look at the tool and update it to include both objective and subjective assessment elements.

As for the 2009-2010 academic year, faculty met and shared their experiences of teaching their courses at the department’s June “Assessment Summit”. Each faculty member discussed in detail their own personal assessment of how their students performed, and described the teaching methods that worked or did not work. Faculty also submitted written assessments for each course to the Department Chair, who will review and provide input for faculty Retention, Tenure, and Promotion files. Copies of each course assessment are available in the department office if the Dean would like to review the assessment for each class.

The Department of Environmental Studies is anticipating the movement to pre- and post-assessments of all our classes beginning fall 2010, and we welcome comments and feedback from the Dean.

Thank you.