Celebrating Assessment, Student Learning and Success

By Amy Liu, Interim University Faculty Assessment Coordinator

Our mission statement and learning goals are our promises to the students and their families. Our mission statement pledges:

- California State University, Sacramento is committed to teaching and learning as its primary responsibility. In both the academic and student support programs, success is measured in terms of student learning.….  

- California State University, Sacramento is dedicated to the life-altering potential of learning that balances a liberal arts education with depth of knowledge in a discipline. We are committed to providing an excellent education to all eligible applicants who aspire to expand their knowledge and prepare themselves for meaningful lives, careers, and service to their community.

Our Faculty Senate adopted the following Baccalaureate Learning Goals for the 21st Century (FS 09-74/GE/GRPC/Ex.) in November 2009 in hopes that our students will demonstrate:

- **Competence in the Disciplines**: The ability to demonstrate the competencies and values listed below in at least one major field of study and to demonstrate informed understandings of other fields, drawing on the knowledge and skills of disciplines outside the major.

- **Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World** through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts.

- **Intellectual and Practical Skills, including**: inquiry and analysis, critical, philosophical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork and problem solving, practiced extensively across the curriculum in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance.

- **Personal and Social Responsibility, including**: civic knowledge and engagement—local and global, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, foundations and skills for lifelong learning anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.

- **Integrative Learning, including**: synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies. All of the above are demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems.

Many of our academic departments and colleges have used assessment data in the past few years to help administrators, faculty, and staff to assist our

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Integrating Assessment and Program Review More Effectively and Efficiently

Jeffrey Brodd, Kimo Ah Yun, Ben Amata, and Amy Liu, Program Review Oversight Committee (PROC)

Program review on our campus is inextricably tied to assessment, now more so than before. The Program Review Pilot Study, approved by the Faculty Senate for 2007-2012, is based on the WASC (Western Associate of Schools and Colleges) model, making assessment the foundational component. As noted in the Fall 2009 Assessment Newsletter article featuring program review, “Almost two decades ago WASC began to discuss changes to its standards, which had been descriptive in nature, to emphasize reflection on student learning outcomes and to support reflection with evidence drawn from good assessment.” That article clarified that the new program review is intended to alleviate the burdensomeness commonly associated with the preparation of the departmental self-study in the past.

Here we propose two possible methods by which the integration of assessment and program review can be accomplished more effectively and efficiently. The first approach is our shared vision of what might be called “the program review of the future,” a process that seamlessly integrates the accomplishments reflected in the annual assessment reports into the six-year cycle of program review.

In Fall 2009, the Faculty Senate adopted a newly revised set of five Baccalaureate Learning Goals (BLGs) applicable to all undergraduate programs at our university:

1. Competence in the Disciplines;
2. Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World;
3. Intellectual and Practical Skills;
4. Personal and Social Responsibility;
5. Integrative Learning.

In this first approach, we can focus our annual assessment efforts on one of the BLGs each year. Then, in the sixth year, we can reflect in the self-study on the “big picture,” considering the interrelationship of the five goals, discerning the greatest needs for programmatic improvement, and making note of the most satisfying accomplishments. This integrative approach should prove to make as seamless as possible the linkage between assessment and program review, efficiently and effectively leading to real improvements in student learning and success.

The second approach highlights the potential of the “focused inquiry” for enhancing a department’s overall assessment system. In general, this component is intended to afford departments the freedom to choose from among a wide array of topics, not necessarily those that directly involve assessment. As clarified by the Pilot Study document, this third section of the Self-study is to set forth the “results of a focused inquiry addressing issues of particular interest/concern to the program itself, in the context of what is currently important to the college and university.” The variety of focused inquiries thus far undertaken is quite impressive. The Department of Geology, for example, posed as one of its focused inquiry questions: “How well does the structure of our programs meet the needs of our faculty to maintain fulfilling professional lives?” The Department of Philosophy opted to examine the potential...

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of emphasizing the specific subject area of applied ethics as the Department seeks to become the center of philosophy for the Sacramento region. Even with such focused inquiries as these, some degree of linkage to assessment is possible, even natural.

Other departments have chosen issues that directly involve assessment—a surefire way to integrate assessment and program review efficiently and effectively. The Department of Mathematics and Statistics featured in its focused inquiry a longitudinal study of its pre-calculus course offerings and correlative degree of success in calculus. The study yields a wealth of valuable information on student learning that is informing decision-making and leading to significant improvements in student learning and success. For example, the demonstrable benefits of the MATH29A-B sequence has enhanced advising efforts aimed at clarifying to incoming students these benefits and their pre-calculus options.

In his External Consultant’s report (like all such reports, accessible in the Academic Program Review Reports section of the Academic Affairs website: www.csus.edu/acaf/progReview/prgmrevrpts.stm), Dr. John Sarli (CSU San Bernardino) makes clear his admiration:

In this very thorough Focused Inquiry the Department has made remarkable contributions not just to its self-study but to CSU mathematics departments by example. With the possible exception of Cal Poly Pomona, I know of no other campus that has integrated diagnostic math testing with longitudinal data to this extent. Departments whose students rely on courses beginning with pre-calculus should be confident that they are being well served. (p.14)

Other significant achievements in assessment across campus could also be highlighted here. This particular example serves to illustrate the long-term benefits of a steadfast approach to assessment that does not insist on making great strides overnight. The key is to keep making positive steps and therefore gradual progress. To quote the Roman emperor Augustus, “Make haste slowly.” As Rome was not built in a day, we too should not expect to achieve complete and ideal assessment systems in just a semester or two. But during the course of the six-year program review cycle, by focusing on the “day-to-day” of assessment, all programs can make great strides toward excellence.

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students in receiving the best possible education. This includes acquiring the broad knowledge of the liberal arts education with the depth of a discipline, as well as, thinking critically, communicating effectively, solving complicated problems, and becoming an excellent leader in the family, the region, and the world. Thus, the most central purpose of our assessment is student learning and success.

“Looking back, the entire process was generally positive, and our department is already much better for it.”

In the 2009 and 2010 academic year, significant progress in assessment was made. For the first time, all the academic departments submitted annual assessment reports. More faculty members have used explicit criteria, such as the VALUE rubrics, to collect the data. Technology, such as TaskStream, has been used for the first time in some colleges to make data collection, data analysis, and data reporting more effective and efficient. More programs have excelled in using the assessment results to improve student learning and/or make meaningful program changes.

To make program reviews more effective and efficient, the Program Review Oversight Committee (PROC) has proposed two possible approaches that can systematically connect the annual assessment to the six year program review and link program learning outcomes to the university’s Baccalaureate Learning Goals.

Besides academic programs, our support programs have also used assessment as effective tools to help students. In this newsletter, Dr. Beth Miller, Director of Academic Advising & Career Center, tells us how the Academic Advising Center has improved student retention and success. Dr. Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator, shares how the Writing Center has assisted our students in becoming more successful, and how the Writing across the Curriculum Program has used assessment to assist faculty in teaching students to write more effectively.
By Beth Merritt Miller, Director of Academic Advising & Career Center

The Academic Advising Center at Sacramento State provides General Education and Graduation Requirement drop-in advising, New Student Orientation, First Year Advising, Second Year Advising for students on probation, and coordination of the reinstatement process for academically disqualified and dismissed students. In addition, the peer mentors in the First Year Experience program are hired, trained, and supervised through Academic Advising. The office sees approximately 22,000 students each year and an additional 15,000 students and parents through orientation. With the increasing demand for more staff to advise and coordinate these programs coupled with the decrease of resources available, it’s even more important that we are assessing the effectiveness of each program.

Student Affairs Assessment

Sac State has been at the forefront of meaningful assessment nationally within divisions of Student Affairs across the country. Lori Varlotta, the Vice President for Student Affairs, began an aggressive assessment effort in 2006. Every director in the division learned how to develop a purposeful assessment plan and how to write student learning outcomes and program objectives (and distinguish the difference between the two). Over the last four years, the directors have refined their studies, and found meaningful – and not so meaningful – results through assessment.

Student Learning Outcomes

In the beginning, the most challenging assessment to develop was student learning outcomes. Academic Advising learned a lot from the first instrument that we developed in 2006 for new student orientation. We were measuring, at the end of the orientation session, what the students had learned from attending the orientation. In order to find out what they knew entering the University, we had the students complete a multiple choice pre-test. At the end of the session, they completed an online post-test prior to registering for classes. The first year we conducted this assessment, we could not figure out how the students knew so much before starting the orientation program. The big lesson we learned was student leaders who administered the pre-test needed to be trained. The student leaders thought that it was a reflection on them if the students did not perform well on the pre-test. Since the assessments did not link to the student leaders or their performance, it didn’t occur to us to explain the assessment itself in great detail. We replicated the assessment the following year, trained the leaders on what a pre-test/post-test should measure, and reassured them that assessments are not linked to their job performance. It was a great learning opportunity for us as professionals, to teach the leaders more about assessment.

In another learning outcome assessment, we measured first year students’ understanding of remediation requirements and the importance of completing preparatory classes in a timely fashion. Of the 2,000 first year students who participated in the first year advising program, 840 surveys were administered during fall semester and 1,077 were administered during spring semester. We used Student Voice, an assessment platform, to administer the survey through handheld devices, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs). Students completed the survey at the conclusion of their advising appointment. We found that less than half understood the consequences of not completing their remediation during their fall advising appointment. By the spring semester advising appointment, students who were required to complete remediation understood the importance of passing those classes in order to remain enrolled for the following fall semester. Results indicated that students had less concern about the consequences in fall since they still had two semesters to complete the requirements. The students paid more attention to the long term consequences only after they needed to deal with the reality that they may not be able to return for the following fall semester.

Program Objectives

In addition to the student learning outcomes, our assessments include program objectives. We are tracking students who participate in the programs and their retention rates (and, eventually, their graduation rates). The Second Year Retention Program was created in spring 2009 with a complete program launch in fall 2009 after reviewing data from Institutional Research that showed that students who start their second year on academic probation have a graduation rate of about 13 percent. This program provides intrusive advising to this student population. The program includes two advising sessions each semester, and referral to either a time management or study skills
workshop, or a career counseling session. This intrusive advising program is meant to provide the support the students need to be successful. Initial assessment of the program shows that these students are retained at a much higher rate than that of previous cohorts (4% withdrew from the 2009-2010 cohort, compared to 46% withdrew from the 2003 comparison cohort).

This is just a sample of some of the assessments administered through Academic Advising programs.

We have been able to show through assessments that our programs are successful at retaining and eventually graduating students. For a complete review of assessments from Academic Advising and all departments in Student Affairs, visit the Student Affairs Assessment Plan at http://saweb.csus.edu/students/assessment.aspx. For more information about Academic Advising programs, contact Beth Merritt Miller, merrittmillerb@csus.edu.

Assessing the Writing Across the Curriculum Program

**By Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator**

If program assessment is a form of inquiry, then it should begin with questions. When the Faculty Senate Reading and Writing Subcommittee decided to assess the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program in 2010, we decided to focus on two central questions:

- What was WAC’s impact on faculty development?
- What was WAC’s role in directly supporting students’ literacy and retention?

To measure qualities as complex and abstract as “faculty development” or “student literacy” the Subcommittee needed to consider both quantitative and qualitative measures. We created an assessment plan that included the collection of raw data as well as information from a survey of faculty on the WAC email distribution list, “pre” and “post” writing assignments from faculty who participated in the WAC seminar, and “pre” and “post” drafts of student writing from the University Reading and Writing Center.

**The Impact of WAC on Faculty**

In order to measure WAC’s impact on faculty development, we first collected information about the number of contacts WAC has had with faculty since its inception in 2003. There were a total 2,010 faculty contacts, including 155 attending WAC Retreats, 340 attending the campus WAC Conferences, and 1,089 faculty attending campus workshops and seminars. There were 7,555 student contacts, including 405 classroom presentations, 250 thesis workshops, and many Writing Center tutoring sessions.

The following is a small sample of the comments from a survey of the faculty on the WAC email distribution list that indicates the influence of the WAC program on students and faculty:

> “This is a fantastic program. I am impressed by the many resources available to me. The workshops seem to be extremely relevant to my teaching needs.”

> “It was good to meet instructors from other departments and compare notes on our common experiences regarding challenges in approaching writing assignments.”

> “Participation in the WAC workshops have really helped me to maintain the writing components in large classes without being overwhelmed by workload.”

> “I have learned how to “think out of the box” when creating writing assignments. There is more than the typical research paper!”

> “I have included the use of rubrics for feedback to students on early drafts of essays, which I had not done before reading the WAC newsletter and which both my students and I have found quite helpful.”

The qualitative comments emphasized the ways WAC had helped faculty develop new and more effective ways of designing reading and writing assignments and responding to student writing, but we wanted more evidence than just a survey could provide. So the Sub-
committee collected “pre” and “post” reading and writing assignments from faculty who participated in the semester-long WAC seminar. What we discovered is that faculty made significant changes to their assignments after attending the seminar. They added learning objectives, peer response workshops, grading criteria, reading response journals, and made substantial changes to the entire sequence of their assignments.

In terms of both strengths and weaknesses of the program, what we found is that the workshops were often difficult for faculty to attend, and did not always have a lasting or major impact on pedagogy, but the WAC retreat and WAC seminar were well-attended and did have a major impact. This result has led the WAC program to focus more on extended activities like retreats, seminars, and reading groups and focus less on brief workshops.

Assessing the University Reading and Writing Center’s Effect on Students

Since the Writing Center is the primary way that the WAC program engages in direct contact with students, the Subcommittee included it in our assessment. In addition to tracking the number of tutoring sessions, we analyzed exit surveys of student writers. Of the 125 students who filled out a survey, 98% found the Writing Center helpful in understanding assignments and revising and developing ideas. Also, 96% would recommend the Writing Center to a fellow student. Here is a small sampling of what students wrote about the Writing Center:

“You definitely helped make my first-year experience a great and successful one.”

“My writing has improved greatly coming to the Writing Center.”

“I really enjoyed receiving this service and appreciate all the suggestions and advice. It really helped.”

“I found it very helpful to me and I believe that I have improved my writing skills because of our meetings.”

“My grades have improved and by tutoring one-one-one I gained new writing skills.”

The information from the survey persuaded us of the value of the Writing Center, but we wanted to once again go beyond the numbers and collect qualitative data. We collected “pre” tutoring session and “post” tutoring session drafts from student writers. What we found was that even after a single session with a tutor, students made major changes to their papers, from reorganizing paragraphs to refocusing their central argument to adding examples for support and development. The one area that students noted as a concern in our self-assessment was that the Writing Center wasn’t open enough hours in the evening. Because of this feedback, we opened later and extended our hours until 7:00pm and developed an online tutoring option using iMEET to create further evening hours.

Please visit our website at www.csus.edu/wac to find out more about the WAC program, and to see the full assessment report.