A shift toward assessment of key competencies represents a major cultural shift in assessment.

This issue of the assessment newsletter focuses on how to make the most out of our assessment practices on campus. Major changes have just been approved for the WASC accreditation process and many of these changes are centered on assessment of baccalaureate degree programs and key competencies rather than a strict focus on knowledge within the discipline. These changes will have major impacts on both assessment expectations and practices on campus. The newsletter articles will give a preview of the changes that are likely to come in light of the redesign of the WASC accreditation process.

For the first article, Dr. Jackie Donath discusses changes that are coming as a result of the redesign of the WASC accreditation process. Dr. Donath describes the way in which assessment is likely to change as a result of the WASC redesign. At the core of this is a focus on assessment of five core competencies that are considered basic elements of all baccalaureate degrees. She describes the ways that assessments can be successfully aligned with various elements of the degree program. For the second article, Julian Heather interviewed Dr. Don Taylor, the University’s accreditation liaison. In this article, Dr. Taylor describes the challenges that our campus will face as we move toward the 2017 WASC accreditation visit. As is pointed out in the interview with Dr. Donath, Dr. Taylor also indicates that the assessment of core competencies in the major will play an important role in this process. At the present time, most assessment within the majors focuses on content assessment. A shift toward assessment of key competencies (e.g. writing, critical thinking, analytical reasoning) represents a major cultural shift in assessment. Dr. Taylor points out that the second major challenge that we will face deals with quality of the assessment data that is collected. Recent changes in the format of the annual assessment reports are intended to deal with issues of the quality of assessment strategies that will indicate program and degree quality on campus. In the third article, Amy Liu describes the significant progress we have made in program assessment. However, as at many other higher education institutions, the quality of these program assessment reports varies a great deal. The final article by Elizabeth Strasser provides a summary of annual assessment reports on campus by interviewing faculty assessment consultants, Dr. Shannon Datwyler and Dr. Julian Heather. This article focuses on some of the best practices that were observed from a review of the 2011-2012 annual assessment reports. One of the most critical elements of any departmental assessment report is sustainability: can the department sustain the assessment efforts that they propose? This article provides characteristics and elements of sustainable assessment programs on campus.
1. **What are the biggest changes coming to the campus from WASC?**

   The redesign of the Handbook of Accreditation and the Institutional Review Process (IRP) that WASC has been working on for the past several years builds on the good work our region’s institutions have been doing, while responding to comments and feedback that the Commission received about the strengths and weaknesses of the past 20 years’ effort. The Commission has been very interested in updating processes and structures to ensure compliance with changes in federal regulations and has been very concerned about increasing transparency and accountability of the accreditation process, to make it more understandable and more useful to the multiple stakeholders in the higher education sector.

   From a campus perspective, there are several significant changes:

   1. The institutional review process has been streamlined—with one review happening entirely on-line and an on-campus visit that focuses on evidence of student learning and the quality of the degrees offered by the institution.

   2. The Handbook of Accreditation explicitly focuses on 5 core competencies which are considered basic elements of any baccalaureate degree in CFR\(^1\) 2.2a. Therefore, institutions need to demonstrate that their graduates have met baccalaureate level standards of achievement in those competencies.

   3. WASC will be focusing its attention on the results of assessment at the degree level. Institutions will need to make a strong case (with evidence of their choosing) that their degree holders (both undergraduate and graduate) have met the learning goals for their degrees set by the faculty. For Sac State, I think that means that in the next few years (before our review) we must develop clear connections between what students demonstrate they know and can do (in whatever environments we decide to examine—classes, co-curricular activities, GE areas, etc.) and our baccalaureate learning goals. We will also need to provide evidence that we have taken meaningful, focused action when we discover disconnects between our learning goals and student performance.

2. **Now that the redesign has been finalized, how can the campus get itself ready?**

   The redesigned handbook and review process will be officially adopted by the Commission at its February 2013 meeting. I am the chair of the Policy and Planning Committee that will bring forward a proposal at that meeting after we have a chance to review a final round of regional feedback and make any changes we feel are required. The handbook would then go into effect July 2013. I think our best campus strategy would be to begin to focus our energies on assessment of the core competencies in a variety of settings (the major, GE, etc.) in order to build a strong argument for our students’ achievements in those areas. We should also think about any special qualities or learning experiences that we feel distinguish our graduates from others—such as community engagement, experiential learning, etc. In this regard, Sac State has a good foundation from which to work as our previous WASC review included discussion of a number of programs which supported our Destination 2010\(^2\) initiative and we might easily re-frame some of that work with a focus on student learning and the nature of our degree.

3. **Which stakeholders were involved in the redesign?**

   The WASC Commission consists of members with expertise in higher education representing the CSU system, the UC system, private colleges, faith-based institutions, and specialized colleges in our region (California, Hawai‘i, Guam and the Mariana islands.) Additionally, the Commission has public members, not directly involved in the education of students, including higher education consultants, foundation presidents and “ordinary” citizens interested in higher education. All the Commission members had numerous opportunities to offer suggestions and criticism of the documents as they were developed. The

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1. Criteria for Review
Commission created a steering committee and working groups to do the actual work of planning and revision. These panels drew on a variety of people in the region, including students, faculty, administrators and interested members of the public. Each iteration of the handbook revision was circulated to the region’s institutions—mostly to presidents, CEOs and administration-level personnel. Additionally, I joined Ralph Wolff, the president of WASC, on several trips to the CSU and UC Faculty Senate Executive Committees and participated in both northern and southern California forums in which institutional representatives and members of the public provided feedback on the proposed changes to the process. In addition, the past several WASC Academic Resource Conferences (held every April) have had sessions on the proposed revisions and opportunities for the Commission and WASC staff to receive comments.

4. How are other campuses effectively responding to this?
Two pilot projects have been created which include 12 institutions which are working on the evaluation of the five competencies identified in the proposed changes to the Handbook of Accreditation. I believe they will report on their experiences at the April 2013 Academic Resource Conference. I think our campus would do well to begin as soon as possible to create a working committee to review the new process and reporting template, to begin to frame our responses and to identify areas where the campus may need to do more work before our review. About 18 months before our report is due, we will need to send a team to a WASC training, but we can certainly have a lot of work underway before that date.

5. What else do you want to tell us?
I believe that faculty involvement in the revised accreditation process is even more crucial to our success than it was in the past cycle of accreditation. I believe the way the Commission has re-framed its focus on student learning and student success at the level of the degree and WASC’s concern with the meaning and quality of the baccalaureate are strongly aligned with the prerogatives and responsibilities of the faculty. We should embrace the accreditation process as a chance to have a meaningful set of conversations about our efforts, our expectations and our goals.

“I believe that faculty involvement in the revised accreditation process is even more crucial to our success than it was in the past cycle of accreditation.”
Where We Are and Where We Are Headed

Julian Heather, Faculty Assessment Consultant

Dr. Don Taylor, Interim Assistant Vice-President for Academic Programs and Global Engagement, is the university’s accreditation liaison with WASC, a position which allows him to compare Sacramento State to peer institutions. He concluded: “We face challenges that are similar to the challenges that are going on elsewhere in higher education.” These challenges, which he refers to as “macro challenges”, are described in a concept paper by Peter Ewell (2010)1: changing patterns of participation; new higher education providers; a new paradigm of teaching and learning; constrained resources; external demands for performance; external demands for transparency; and a global higher education system. Dr. Taylor highlighted the importance of one of Ewell’s conclusions: “These trends, as well the changing paradigm of teaching and learning, will require even more emphasis to be placed on aligned standards of academic achievement, as well as solid evidence that these standards are being achieved.” (Ewell, 2010, p.4).

For the next reaccreditation visit in 2017, Dr. Taylor said the first step for the university is to “begin to put in place those structures, those changes, so that we can begin to see results that make us competitive in terms of the educational effectiveness mission of this university because that’s what we will need to demonstrate to WASC.” One of the necessary changes is cultural: “We need to...reinvent and work together to evolve a new culture that moves with the times, and if possible to move ahead of the times because it moves pretty quickly.” He sees the Provost’s Advisory Committee on Assessment (PACA) as important because it involves multiple stakeholders working on a strategy “to move the assessment profile” on campus, “grappling with each and every one of these issues and making recommendations to the Provost that we can begin to implement”. Examples of recommendations which have been implemented include (1) the creation of a team approach to assessment and (2) greater cooperation between the Office of Academic Program Assessment and the Program Review Oversight Committee to ensure “more synergism between what a program review team is looking at when it comes to assessment and what the assessment office is telling people on this campus...so that if folks have done the right things in the five years leading up to program review, at the program review stage all they’re doing is summarizing and pulling together what the evidence is in terms of student learning take-aways, changes, and so forth from those programs.”

The next step in preparing for the 2017 reaccreditation visit is to address certain key questions about “the effectiveness of those processes and structures. Where effective, what data do you have for that? What’s the evidence that it’s working? Where not effective, what data do you have for that; and what changes are you putting in place in order to make the ineffective effective, to make the weaker strong?” Dr. Taylor echoes Ewell when he says “the greatest issue with WASC reaccreditation and the new WASC standards is the evidence and the ability to demonstrate evidence of learning and progress.”

This issue will challenge programs in several ways. To start, programs will have to broaden their assessment focus: “There’s an imbalance...a greater propensity within the majors to assess subject matter competency than they are the higher order skills of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, broader problem-solving, oral communication skills, that sort of thing.” Dr. Taylor pointed to one way in which the campus has begun to address this challenge: “Part of what we’re trying to do now on this campus is to get the subject matter areas—the majors—to see that there is a relationship between what is going on in GE and what they’re doing, and to begin to capture some of that. And the attempt recently at working with the Faculty Learning Collaborative has been very helpful in doing that.”

A second challenge is that programs will also have to consider data quality: “We do have some challenges though in terms of the quality of the data because we are looking for ways to improve the data because that data becomes evidence when it comes to accreditation issues down the line.” Dr. Taylor highlighted the role of the annual assessment reports in addressing this challenge: “We’ve been working on improving the annual assessment reports because those too are critical. They go more to the majors, but we needed to have effective measuring tools, reliable data, because again, it’s a trend towards evidence. It’s a trend towards material that people can look at and say ‘yes this is what you’re doing.’ It’s no longer a matter of our students took this exam and they passed. It is...that we can have a level of confidence that it’s not just on an exam score, but it is on skills, values, attitudes, competencies that they can work with in different contexts and in different environments.”

1 Available from https://www.wascsenior.org/redesign/conceptpapers
For Dr. Taylor, it is important for departments to understand what assessment will require them to do: “What I’d like to see is strong conversation on this campus about the new WASC redesign, and all that we need to do—faculty, staff, students, and institutional process—to get us there.” To facilitate this, he encourages “faculty members to attend [the] workshops that are being organized by the Office of Academic Program Assessment to guide them, and to contact the Office of Academic Program Assessment with any specific questions. They should also take a look at the feedback that is coming to them from their last academic assessment reports, which came through the IPP process, and see what suggestions are being made.”

Dr. Taylor concluded by acknowledging the improvement that has been made: “I have seen progress with assessment over the past five years on this campus. We’re now seeing assessment reports coming from almost 100% of the campus. We’re seeing a movement towards use of direct evidence. Although we still see a preponderance of indirect evidence as data, people are getting more and more to know about the need to balance some of the indirect evidence data with some of the direct evidence. So I am pleased with where we are and where we appear to be headed. We just need to be stubborn and hold on to those ideals…and do our best to get to where we need to get. It’s tough. Resources are constrained, both in terms of personnel as well as in terms of money and so on, but we can’t give up, we can’t turn our backs because we all want to continue to work at an institution that is respected…and educationally-effective.”

**Recent Program Assessment at Sacramento State**

*Amy Liu, Director, Office of Academic Program Assessment*

**Significant Progress on Campus**

For the first time, all the degree programs (undergraduate, graduate, and credential, not just the academic unit such as college or department) have provided an assessment report with at least four program learning outcomes. These are the most comprehensive reports of program assessment on our campus to date. As of January 2012, undergraduate programs have made the most progress. Almost all the undergraduate programs have developed an assessment plan (96%), come up with learning goals/objectives/outcomes (96%), and collected assessment data (96%). About two-thirds (63 percent) used assessment data, and 57 percent updated the assessment plans.

The overwhelming majority of credential programs also developed an assessment plan (86%) and had learning outcomes (86%). More than 70 percent collected data and updated the assessment plan, and almost 60 percent (57 percent) used the assessment data.

Seventy-seven percent of graduate programs have also developed learning outcomes, and more than 60 percent collected data (65%) and developed assessment plans (62%). More than half (52%) used the assessment data. Yet, only 35 percent updated the assessment plan.

**Recent Program Assessment Status**

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Program Assessment Opportunities for the Future

The quality of program assessment reports varies a great deal. Many assessment reports were hard to understand or to use. For a few reports, the four assessment consultants spent a great deal of time guessing what the program learning outcomes are (vs. course learning outcomes or institutional outcomes): i.e. what should the students in the program know, value, and be able to do (at or near the time of graduation)? Some programs confused program learning outcomes with course learning outcomes or with program learning goals: either the program learning outcomes are too narrow (course learning outcomes) or not measurable (just learning goals).

Moreover, many programs have not set any standard of performance for any of their learning outcomes. Few departments and colleges have established explicit expectations for the graduate and undergraduate programs. Often it was unclear how the departments can have the same learning outcomes for different programs (e.g. graduate and undergraduate), how a learning outcome assessed in a particular year is related to the overall assessment plan for a department, or whether the programs have followed or updated their assessment plans as needed.

The quality of program assessment data, data analysis, and data presentation also differs significantly. Some reports did not provide any data, while other data in the reports were minimal, incomplete, or unclear. Therefore, a lot of relevant data were unreported, unreliable, invalid, or not actionable. This may be due to several factors: 1) different programs often interpret the open-ended instructions in the template quite differently; 2) many programs did not set any standard of performance for a learning outcome; 3) the programs are not clear on who can use the data for what purposes. Thus, it was not surprising that the data in the assessment reports were more often used by the instructors of the courses (where the data were collected) and/or by the programs, but much less likely to be used by the college, the university, the general public or policy makers to make important decisions on curriculum planning, enrollment management, student service, or resource allocation.

Data and Methods

In Fall 2011, Academic Affairs and the Faculty Senate at Sacramento State asked each academic unit (department, college, or program) to use a template to submit an assessment report for each degree program by January 2012. These reports have provided the assessment data to answer one of the 12 questions included in the full IPP (Instructional Program Priority) report for each program.

Each academic unit also has to submit an annual assessment report before June 30 each year. In 2011-2012, departments or colleges did not have to write a separate annual assessment report; instead they used the assessment reports submitted in Dec. 2011 or Jan. 2012 as their annual assessment reports. These assessment reports took many departments and colleges a significant amount of time and effort to complete and provided the most comprehensive information about program assessment at Sacramento State since 2006/2007.

We used to have the university assessment coordinator provide feedback about the annual assessment reports and write one report to summarize the assessment results for the university as whole. In summer and fall 2012, for the first time, the university put together a committee of four assessment consultants to read through all the program assessment reports and write feedback reports for each academic unit. This was done in hopes of attaining better quality and actionable assessment feedback.

Each of the four consultants read ¼ of all the reports for the first reading and another ¼ for the second reading. For the first reading, the departments were randomly selected:

1. All the academic units (mostly departments, colleges or programs) were arranged by alphabetical order, and 11 academic units were picked by every 4th. Now they were four groups of academic units;
2. Each of the four groups of academic units and each of the four faculty consultants were assigned a random number of 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively;
3. Each faculty was then matched to a group of 11 academic units.
How to Improve Outcomes Assessment on Campus

Elizabeth Strasser, Faculty Assessment Consultant

During late Fall 2011 and early Spring 2012, university programs were requested to use a Learning Outcome Assessment Template prepared by the Office of Academic Affairs in support of the Faculty Senate’s Instructional Program Priorities process conducted during Spring 2012. The template asked for descriptions of eight elements, including programmatic organizational culture about learning outcomes, priority and alignment of four learning outcomes with the university’s Baccalaureate Learning Goals, data collection methods for evaluating student success with learning outcomes and their impact on the curriculum, and interaction of programs with alumni and accrediting agencies. The Learning Outcome Assessment Templates were examined by the Senate Committee on Instructional Program Priorities and subsequently accepted by Academic Affairs as the 2011-12 Assessment Reports.

Per usual practice, the content of the 2011-12 Assessment Reports was then analyzed by an assessment committee consisting of the Director (Dr. Amy Liu) of the Office of Academic Program Assessment (OAPA) and three Faculty Assessment Consultants (Drs. Shannon Datwyler, Sharyn Gardner, and Julian Heather) and made available in documents entitled “Feedback for the 2011-2012 Annual Assessment Report.” The feedback offers “a summary of the documentation provided by the Department, a description of the assessment strategies used to assess program learning outcomes, and feedback for improving assessment practices in the future.”1 The current status of each department’s assessment progress is provided in a useful table. Additionally, among the provided appendices are four WASC rubrics for assessing a program assessment plans and students’ products – both critical for program review.

To get a more in-depth overview of the Faculty Consultants’ impressions of the status of outcomes assessment across the university, I interviewed Drs. Datwyler and Heather, asking three questions.

1. What characteristics do you see in programs with sustainable assessment plans?

They responded, “What makes for a sustainable assessment plan is a program not assessing all their outcomes every single year; instead, assessing one or maybe two learning outcomes in a way that’s informative to the program—that will give enough data over a period of program review, to tell a complete story. It is very important, too, to close the loop. To assess how effective your changes have been.” Indeed, “if [programs] are not going to close the loop immediately, they need to schedule ahead to revisit their assessment plan, because they might come up with new things they want to look at that reflect the changes that they’ve made.” Further inquiry revealed that neither consultant saw “a whole lot of programs that were closing the loop.” Instead, they found that “a lot of programs are early in the process.” What they saw very often “were cases where programs were making changes and attempting to close the loop, but it wasn’t based on assessment

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1 In memo from OAPA included in the feedback.
data. It was based on anecdotal data or other sorts of evidence, such as student surveys. Both consultants believe that “the culture is changing: it’s just got a little ways to go to understand the need for direct measures of learning achievement that can inform curricular changes.”

2. What makes an assessment plan sustainable?
I asked both consultants if they could give me an example of a good sustainable assessment plan. They responded that “not a lot of programs have feasible, valid, and reliable assessment plans.” What they’ve “seen is a lot of assessment plans that aren’t really assessing the learning outcomes that the departments have set forward.” Dr. Datwyler stated: “One of the few that I saw that really had learning outcomes that were being assessed was English. It’s got the assessments that are in line with the learning outcomes, so I think that’s really what’s going to make it efficient, sustainable, feasible, valid, and reliable – to have your assessment plan in line with your learning outcomes. And, that may necessitate re-writing learning outcomes to simplify or make them more general. Making them something that might be more broadly applicable.

You can assess writing, for example, and one of your learning outcomes is that students will be able to effectively write, then that’s something that’s sort of a broader outcome that could be assessed through a variety of means.” Dr. Heather added that “as long as you set up a totally defined, elaborate set of criteria about what it means to be able to write.”

This lead Dr. Datwyler to state “That’s actually a good point and brings up rubrics. Departments that have very clearly defined rubrics or other sorts of assessments—that is something that is often times useful. We’ve seen a variety of different types of assessment tools that have been used, some of them are multiple-choice based, and those very often are knowledge-based, not always but very frequently, whereas there are also more subjective measures that are based on rubrics, such as evaluation of writing or critical thinking or reading skills.”

3. How do you write learning goals and objectives that are assessable?
Dr. Heather replied that “they have to involve something you can see evidence for. If you have a very general one, like critical thinking, so long as you define what it means in your discipline and the criteria were presented then it’s an assessable learning outcome. If your rubric says ‘demonstrates superior critical thinking,’ then you’re stuck because then you have nothing that is informative for instructors and students. There should be a transparency there for students to put two and two together and say, ‘ok, you’re making me do this here and, therefore, I’m developing this thing you’re assessing me on. And, I know the difference between what is superior critical thinking versus what is average critical thinking.’” Dr. Datwyler added “That’s the key, defining what your terms mean. What does it mean to be good, to be average, below average? You have to define what it means to be someone who thinks critically. For example, in Biological Sciences [defining] ‘good’ might mean drawing from other experiences, other disciplines or sub-disciplines, in order to address a new or novel question. Bringing other information in, thinking in a way that is not text-book based, but is [instead] a generalization of knowledge. So synthesis or drawing from an independent field might be good measures of what it means to think critically… So that brings an important point, it might be that you have a key assignment in the curriculum or a course that you might be using for an assessment piece; however, the grades on the papers don’t have to be the assessment scores. Instead, you might go through very specifically looking for one element that was a requirement of the paper and score that, so it doesn’t have to be where you’re reading deeply into students’ work, it could be a very quick scan and assessment of that learning outcome.”

Dr. Heather added, “Defining the terms is a process, so you have to have some flexibility. You may discover that over time your understanding of what you expect changes and your definition shifts with them. It’s like, ok we’ve defined them like this, but now we see that it isn’t useful at this level of performance and now we have to adjust it.”

Dr. Datwyler adds, “That’s a good point, because I think the best assessments and the best rubrics are general – general enough so that they can be applied to a variety of assignments – so you have to have some flexibility built in to those in order to make them something functional that you can use.” Dr. Heather responded, “that’s what I’m getting at, the idea that you need to be open to changing, adjusting your instruments, adjusting your definitions, adjusting your criteria, as you’ve got to see the instrument itself as an object of inquiry.”

Dr. Datwyler concluded our conversation by saying that assessment instruments “will have to be modified based on your experience. You might use it once and realize that this part doesn’t work and this part does, so now next time you need to do a, b, and c, to make it something where we have a true assessment.”