What’s Next?

Sacramento State is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). The 2012 WASC Academic Resource Conference was held April 17-20th, 2012 in Costa Mesa, CA. The conference focused on the paradigm shift in U.S. higher education, with plenaries, presentations, and informal discussions addressing the causes of that shift, discussing its implications for WASC and the accreditation process, and identifying paths that institutions might take to prepare themselves for increased accountability in the future.

This newsletter adheres closely to the conference theme. In the first article, Shannon Datwyler describes some of the factors that are driving changes in U.S. education. Next, Shannon interviews Jackie Donath, Professor of Humanities and Religious Studies and member of the WASC accrediting commission, about how those changes are impacting the WASC accreditation process and leading to a shift from course and program assessment to university (institutional or degree) assessment. The final two articles describe innovative approaches to program-assessment on this campus and elsewhere. Julian Heather describes three uses of technology-assisted assessment at Sacramento State and identifies some of the issues which programs may face when using technology for programmatic assessment. And finally, Sharyn Gardner summarizes several WASC Academic Resource Conference presentations on course-embedded assessment and capstone experiences.

The changing face of the WASC accreditation process: What is the big picture?

Shannon Datwyler, Faculty Assessment Consultant

In recent years, we have seen major changes in the WASC accreditation process, but what is driving these changes? The last few decades have brought about a change in the higher education landscape. There has been a rise in the number of for-profit universities, many of which offer degree programs partially or entirely online (Ewell, 2010). The greater flexibility within these programs has attracted a large number of students to this sector. In the last decade, the percentage of students who were enrolled in the for-profit university sector increased from 4% in 2000 to 11% in 2009 (Baum and Payea, 2011). Furthermore, 75% of the students enrolled in the for-profit education sector were considered financially independent compared to 25% of students in the 4-year public institution sector who were financially independent. It is also important to note family income levels for students in these sectors. 54% of students in the for-profit education sector have family incomes of $40,000 or less per year as compared to just 28% of students in the public 4-year sector (Baum and Payea, 2011). Why does this matter?

Low-income students qualify for much larger federal financial aid packages than students in higher income brackets. In fact, 24% of Pell Grants awarded in the United States were awarded to students attending for-profit institutions, and approximately 25% of Stafford loans were awarded to students in this sector. In total, approximately 75% of the aid package that students receive at for-profit institutions originates from federal funding in comparison with just 24% of the aid for students attending 4-year public institutions. What is disconcerting about this is that the percentage of students earning degrees in six years from for-profit institutions is just 22%, compared with over 55% of students earning degrees from private, non-profit and public institutions (Baum and Payea, 2011). The large percentage of federal dollars that are entering the for-profit education sector as well as the low completion rate have raised questions at the federal level regarding accountability and transparency in this sector as well as questions of institutional effectiveness in the realm of both public and private higher education.
In addition to the changing economics of higher education, the for-profit sector has brought about unique changes in the delivery of course material. This new "ecology" of higher education is bringing about changes in the mode of content delivery as well as changing the face of the educational providers (Ewell, 2010). Many for-profit institutions deliver the curriculum entirely in an online format or allow students to work at their own pace. Even in the CSU system, there has been a change in the mode of delivery such that some courses are taught entirely or partially in an online format in order to save money amidst tight budgets. While this may be an effective manner in which to deliver content and ensure student learning, these changes necessitate a restructuring of the manner in which we ensure student learning at the individual course level as well as at the programmatic level, particularly in cases where entire program curricula are delivered using these modes. Given the current economic trends, the use of alternative delivery formats that require fewer resources and allowing greater flexibility for students are challenges that will continue to grow. These trends point at two major challenges faced by educators, accrediting agencies, and federal agencies responsible for oversight of federal money in higher education: assurance of student learning and demonstration of institutional effectiveness. To address these issues at the federal level, several independent non-profit organizations have developed standardized learning outcomes that may be used as benchmarks to define broadly the skills and knowledge that a student graduating with a baccalaureate degree would be expected to attain. One example of this is the LEAP learning outcomes that the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) developed (http://www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm). These learning outcomes (on which the Sacramento State Baccalaureate Learning Goals were based) focus on four major areas: (1) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, (2) intellectual and practical skills, (3) personal and social responsibility, and (4) integrative and applied learning. Along with these outcomes, AAC&U has developed a series of 15 rubrics that allow for benchmark assessment of student learning on targeted skills and knowledge within each of these four areas. Building on this, the Lumina Foundation for Higher Education has developed the Degree Qualifications Profile (Adelman et al., 2011). The beta-test version of the Degree Profile outlines five basic areas of learning with benchmark levels that students should attain at the Associate, Bachelor’s, and Master’s degree levels. These five areas of learning are (1) Specialized Knowledge, (2) Broad, Integrative Knowledge, (3) Intellectual Skills, (4) Applied Learning, and (5) Civic Learning (Adelman et al., 2011). Both of these tools may provide the framework to address institutional accountability and standardization of the meaning of a baccalaureate degree across institutions. With the changing landscape of the education sector, a majority of students will attend at least two institutions in the completion of the baccalaureate degree requirements (Baum & Payea, 2011). This, along with outsourcing of general education requirements at some for-profit institutions, brings about questions regarding the paradigm of the accreditation process.

References:

The changing face of the WASC accreditation process: What does this mean for assessment of student learning?

Shannon Datwyler, Faculty Assessment Consultant

In order to better understand the context of the changes in the WASC accreditation process and how programs and departments can provide evidence of student learning within the framework of these changes, I talked with Jackie Donath, Professor of Humanities and Religious Studies and member of the WASC senior accrediting commission. The information provided by Dr. Donath puts into perspective the changes that we are seeing in the WASC accreditation process and provides both context and examples of evidence that may be supplied by programs to assure student learning.

Q: Please briefly describe the top changes in the WASC accreditation process in recent years.

The first change is in the types of assessments that are being evaluated. WASC is looking for a shift in the focus of assessment efforts from course-level assessment to a focus on program-level and institutional-level assessment. Second, WASC is trying to ensure that decision-making is evidence-based. For example, are weaknesses that become evident at the program-level addressed in order to "close the assessment loop"? Finally, WASC is looking for evidence of institutional accountability. Are institutions doing what they say they are doing? This is a change that has been brought about in large part by the for-profit educational sector. These institutions receive a large proportion of the federal financial aid that is available. In order to provide transparency to the public, WASC must assure that there is proper oversight of such programs to ensure the use of federal money in higher education. In addition, the rise in different modalities of the delivery of content (i.e., online only courses and programs) has caused WASC to reconsider what kinds of programs are being accredited.

Q: The WASC accreditation handbook specifies that an institution must fulfill the two core commitments of the commission: Commitment to institutional capacity and Commitment to educational effective-
Assurance of student learning is an important part of this process. What kinds of evidence is WASC looking for from departments and programs as a demonstration of student learning?

WASC is looking for evidence of institutional capacity, something that demonstrates the student learning at the baccalaureate degree level rather than evidence of degrees awarded. This has been met by resistance by some institutions that are accredited by the WASC commission, particularly large, non-profit private institutions where there is a great deal of mystique surrounding the degree. These institutions feel that high graduation rates alone should be sufficient demonstration of the institutional capacity. However, WASC is looking for some demonstration of the “meaning” of the baccalaureate degree and institution-based learning goals. Sacramento State has done just this through adoption of the Baccalaureate Learning Goals. There is also a desire to regularize the baccalaureate education nationwide by developing a set of fundamental skills and knowledge that students should have achieved at the completion of a baccalaureate degree in addition to the “signature” of the degree that is added by the individual institution. Both of these elements are equally important in filling the niche of these programs. Speaking to the fundamental skills, WASC is piloting a series of learning communities to explore the use of the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) developed by the Lumina Foundation (Adelman et al., 2011) as a series of benchmarks for basic skills including critical thinking, verbal literacy and writing. This has been met with resistance from private non-profit Universities but not as much by the CSU system. The goal of this is to identify what the baccalaureate degree should do and how we meet these goals.

WASC intends to obtain evidence of student learning at the level of the program and the institution. Faculty are already doing this pretty well in individual courses, but the focus now is on the larger “universe” of the curriculum as a whole and how the different parts of this universe work together to provide the skill and knowledge sets necessary for student success. The larger question is on an understanding of how the different parts of the curriculum work together to provide a meaningful degree and on what a 21st century education should look like in the changing landscape of higher education. The intent of the WASC commission is to facilitate this process.

Q: Can you provide examples of such evidence and/or best practices?

At this point, most institutions and programs are still very early in the process of developing programs that assure student learning at the level of the program or institution. Some institutions are also resistant to defining program learning outcomes arguing that graduation success speaks to student success and learning. However, WASC is looking for evidence beyond simply the number of degrees awarded. To better understand the characteristics that WASC is looking for in assessing programs, there is a Program Learning Outcome rubric that identifies characteristics of developed and highly developed programs (http://www.wascsenior.org/fndit/files/forms/Program_Learning_Outcomes_Rubric_4_08.pdf). This rubric defines five major areas and criteria for developed and highly developed Program Learning Outcomes in each of these areas. Consulting these characteristics is helpful in understanding the intent of the WASC accrediting commission. My recommendation would be to focus time and energy into defining how programs and departments fall within the scope of the Baccalaureate Learning Goals adopted by the Faculty Senate.

At the institutional level, one way to provide evidence of student learning is through a writing skill exit evaluation. This may be done at the program-level or University wide. This would provide evidence of student performance, note measures of weaknesses and allow us to close the loop by addressing deficiencies in student performance in the curriculum.

Q: Are there standardized assessments (or rubrics) that can be valuable to departments in developing assessment plans?

At the program level, WASC has several rubrics that can be valuable in developing assessment plans. All of these rubrics focus on Program Learning Outcomes and the development of sustainable, informative assessment programs (http://www.wascsenior.org/fndit/files/forms/Rubrics_combined.pdf). Of particular use to departments and programs are the rubrics for assessing Program Learning Outcomes, Portfolios, and Capstone experiences. I would encourage you to look at characteristics of “Developed” and “Highly Developed” programs in each of the criteria.

Q: What improvements is the WASC team looking to see on the next visit?

On November 3, 2011, the WASC commission took action on the accrediting redesign process (http://www.wascsenior.org/resolution-nov2011). Three highlights of the redesign process are described here. First, increasing transparency in the WASC commission accreditation process. Second, increasing institutional accountability for graduating students through review and validation of graduation and retention rates. Finally, WASC is requiring institutions to demonstrate proficiency of students in five key areas: written communication, oral communication, quantitative skills, critical thinking and information literacy. In addition, WASC is piloting a learning community to examine the Degree Qualifications Profile developed by the Lumina Foundation as a way of describing the Baccalaureate degree. Needless to say, this has resulted in pushback from some prestigious private institutions. However, Brandman University has recently adopted the Degree Qualifications Profile as part of the degree program. Overall, WASC is emphasizing student learning and the meaning of the baccalaureate degree at the institutional level.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?

The five years I’ve been at WASC have been the most professionally enlightening for me during my career in higher education. The commissioners include administrators, many of whom are University presidents and provosts, members of the public sector, stakeholders in the educational process, faculty members, and students. Serving on the commission is entirely voluntary and involves 4-6 meetings each year and two campus accreditation visits. Working in this kind of environment forces you to think about higher education in really big ways. What has been most compelling for me is the ways in which the commission works as a supportive and committed team. All team members are considered equally important and each member is committed to institutional...
improvement. I’m also pleased that WASC is also looking to increase student involvement and engagement in the accreditation process.

Because of the sheer number of institutions under WASC jurisdiction (Hawaii, California and Guam) and recent actions to be involved in accreditation of international institutions, WASC has divided into two separate commissions: WASC Senior Commission focused on Baccalaureate and higher degrees and WASC Junior, focusing on junior colleges. Given the changing landscape of education, some community colleges are considering offering baccalaureate degrees. This has brought about a number of questions about the appropriateness of the community college in providing this level of education. First of all, the intent of the community college was to provide preparatory and vocational education to students. Does the offering of baccalaureate degrees spread the resources on these campuses too much? Similar to the issues faced by the WASC senior commission, it will be increasingly important for each institution to define their own niche within the landscape of higher education and demonstrate to stakeholders and students alike, in a way that can be understood, what is expected of students in order to make the degree meaningful.

References:

Technology-Assisted Programmatic Assessment

Julian Heather, Faculty Assessment Consultant

Many presentations at WASC described the use of technology in programmatic and institutional assessment. The process of choosing appropriate technology to support assessment of learning is too complex and contingent on faculty and programs to be discussed in detail here. Instead, this article describes three different choices made by Sacramento State faculty and examines some of the common issues which they had to address.

Taskstream in Teacher Credentialing

Recent state legislation required teacher credentialing programs to create an instrument for assessing learning systematically: the College of Education at Sacramento State uses the Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT). According to Janet Hecsh, Professor in the Teacher Education department, Sacramento State has been at the forefront of integrating technology with the PACT instrument. It piloted—and continues to use—software from Taskstream which was adapted for summative assessment of students in teacher credential programs. Taskstream, which is purchased by students, is used in a number of ways:

- to view state standards
- to view and adapt exemplar activities and rubrics
- as a course management system
- as a repository of course work, field evaluations, and teaching videos
- as a place to create the eportfolio that all students develop for employment

Hecsh characterized Taskstream as a “tool for getting a teaching credential” because students are “able to translate California standards into accessible, interesting, conceptually-focused lessons” and can use the software to go through the instructional cycle of planning, teaching, assessment of learning, reflection, and revision.

The Honors Program and Efolioworld

According to Hecsh, Taskstream best suits a short-term program with external accreditation such as a teaching credential program, but other software, such as efolioworld, may work better for longer-term efolios (electronic portfolios). Vanessa Arnaud uses efolioworld for assessment of the Sacramento State Honors Program, which she directs.

Arnaud feels that a strength of efolioworld is that students can create multiple portfolios of their work. For example, the portfolios created in Honors 1 (the freshman seminar class) are developmental portfolios. Students submit work to four “landing pages”, each of which is connected to one or more Baccalaureate Learning Goals. They also complete an online GE Questionnaire. As students move through the Honors program, they can create additional efolios for each class, adding files in a variety of formats—text, audio, and video. By the time they take the senior capstone course (Honors 103), they will have amassed a large body of work from which to select the material for a showcase efolio that documents learning over the course of their undergraduate career and provides what Arnaud describes as really rich data for assessment.

For Arnaud, having Honors students create an efolio allows them to make connections between multiple General Education courses and to create a “professional identity”. She also feels that it encourages faculty to think beyond their own classes and create an interconnected curriculum.

Key Assignments and SacCT

Jean-Pierre Bayard (Academic Technology & Creative Services) says that while the university has, over the past couple of years, reviewed several different options for technology-assisted assessment, it has yet to find
a product that meets all of its criteria, including cost. He recommends considering a tool used in half the classes taught on campus: SacCT (soon to be powered by Blackboard). In the Fall 2008 newsletter, Bayard wrote (with Raymond Pina) about the potential for using SacCT’s Grade Book to assess learning outcomes. The focus is not on course grades, but on grades received for key assignments which are tied to specific learning outcomes. Bayard points out that such data could serve as one element, among others, of programmatic assessment.

The university’s move to Blackboard facilitates this option; Blackboard’s open database architecture allows grade book data to be accessed through COGNOS, the university’s data warehouse, and manipulated into reports. For example, a program could create one or more key assignments that target the same programmatic learning outcome(s) in all sections; record grades for the assignment (broken down if it measures multiple learning outcomes); and collate that data across sections.

**Issues to Consider**

The three examples described so far represent different options for technology-assisted assessment. How should programs decide which, if any, use of technology might be appropriate for their assessment needs? The evaluation of software options is a complex process that is beyond the scope of this article, and programs considering purchasing from a vendor should consult with Academic Technology and Creative Services (ATCS) and the Office of Academic Program Assessment (OAPA). The following will, hopefully, give programs a preliminary idea of the complexity of that process.

The first step is for faculty to decide what their assessment needs are by clearly defining learning outcomes and determining appropriate ways of collecting evidence of their achievement. The integration of technology into assessment has to match a program’s priorities for assessment and improve that assessment in important ways. The use of Taskstream also aligns course learning outcomes to program learning outcomes.

For the development of their assessment program, full- and part-time faculty at Brandman first worked together to revise their program learning outcomes (PLOs) using Bloom’s digital taxonomy (Churches, 2008). Next, the faculty developed curriculum maps in which they mapped out where PLOs are 1) introduced, 2) practiced, and 3) mastered. Deans and faculty then worked together to develop signature assignments to assess learning outcomes at the
mastery level. These signature assignments and their corresponding rubrics were reviewed and approved by Brandman’s assessment office, and then the assignments and rubrics were built into their assessment systems. As a result, in each course in which program learning outcomes are assessed, there are two approved signature assignments that all faculty teaching the course use every time the course is taught. These two signature assignments are worth a total of 50% of the course grade and collectively assess the program’s learning outcomes.

Based on the collection and analysis of the data from the course-embedded signature assignments, faculty can make curricular changes for continuous improvement. They can also periodically examine the signature assignments to ensure that they are really measuring the specified learning outcomes. The presenters from Brandman indicated that when using course-embedded assessment, it is critical to ensure that PLOs and signature assignments are the same for all delivery models (they have both an online and in-person delivery model for their courses).

They found that the strengths of their course-embedded assessment include the ability to 1) demonstrate equality of learning across delivery systems and 2) disaggregate / aggregate by locations and modality. Because everything is done electronically, they also have a great electronic collection of student learning. As this is still a new process for them, they are still learning about possible challenges, including needing to examine if learning is better in one modality than the other.

**Using Capstone Experiences for Assessment**

Another alternative to assess student learning at the program level is to use a capstone experience. A capstone experience can be an efficient way to assess learning outcomes at the program level.

In one session focused on using capstone experiences, Mimi Czarnik, Professor of English and Associate Dean of Humanities from Alverno College, stated that best practices in capstones for departments / programs do the following:

1. Set standards for graduation;  
2. Collect models of success in the major;  
3. Monitor how students are making connections among their major, minor, and general education; and  
4. Review major program and courses, and make adjustments as necessary.

Czarnik further indicated that best practices in capstones for students help them:

1. Reflect on their achievements in their major;  
2. Make connections among their major, their minor, and their work in general education;  
3. Demonstrate their skills and abilities;  
4. Set professional goals; and  
5. Make the transition from student to professional.

During another session on using capstones for assessment, Jennifer Lindhom, Special Assistant to the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education of UCLA, indicated that they use capstones for assessment in about half of their programs; their goal is to have capstone options for all undergraduates by 2019 (coinciding with UCLA’s centennial). Like Alverno College, their capstone experiences come in many different forms including 1) an honor’s thesis; 2) an individual project, such as campus research, civic or corporate internship, or a community-based or study-abroad project; or 3) a Senior seminar with a paper, an advanced product-design class, a senior performance or art portfolio, or even a group project in an advanced science lab with a paper. It depends on what the program develops and creates.

UCLA’s criteria for creating a capstone are very precise in order to guide faculty. Their criteria state that in order to be approved as a capstone experience, the capstone:

1. Must be a creative, inquiry-based learning experience that deepens the student’s knowledge and integration of the discipline.  
2. Must be part of an upper-division course of at least 4 units and (preferably) taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty.  
3. May be completed individually or by a group, provided each student’s contribution is significant, identifiable, and graded.  
4. Must culminate in a tangible product that can be archived (electronically) by the department or program for three years.  
5. Must provide opportunities for students to share capstone projects with peers; this can occur in class or outside of class.

A critical component to remember, though, for any assessment option is the development of program-level learning outcomes. Whether a program uses course-embedded assessment processes or a capstone experience or any other option, the establishment of clear, concise, and measurable learning outcomes for the program is critical for its success. Czarnik also indicated that programs should consider WASC competencies (writing, speaking, critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and information literacy) as they develop and revise their program learning outcomes.

For more information on UCLA’s capstone initiative and learning outcomes, please go to www.capstones.ucla.edu and www.learningoutcomes.ucla.edu

For more information on Alverno College’s ability-based curriculum, please go to www.alverno.edu/academics/ouruniquecurriculum/