Introduction

The assessment landscape has changed rapidly in the last few years. The first two articles in this issue of the Assessment Newsletter describe two related changes. First, Drs. Jackie Donath and Amy Liu explore the Degree Qualifications Profile, a key concept that underlies the WASC redesign and its move towards the assessment of core competencies. Next, Dr. Elizabeth Strasser provides more information about the five core competencies that WASC is requiring all campuses to assess and explains the potential role of nationally-developed rubrics in their assessment. The final two articles continue the focus on practical ideas that can help faculty improve assessment practices while managing their workload. In the third article, Dr. Julian Heather provides guidelines for writing assessable program learning outcomes. Finally, Dr. Shannon Datwyler suggests sustainable and realistic approaches to developing effective assessment plans.

Degree Qualification Profile: Its Implications for Assessment and WASC Redesign

Dr. Jackie Donath, WASC Commissioner and Professor of Humanities and Religious Studies
with Introduction by Dr. Amy Liu, Director of Assessment and Professor of Sociology

Introduction

The Lumina Foundation published its Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) in 2011, which has stimulated extensive discussions about the following key questions for higher education in America:

1. What do we want our students to know, do, and value?
2. What do our degrees really mean with respect to what graduates know, value and can do?
3. What really counts as evidence of student learning?
4. What are the best strategies for developing and documenting student achievement?

In the following article, Dr. Jackie Donath will discuss the relationship between the DQP and the new WASC redesign. She explores the question: Can the DQP help faculty members meaningfully think about and act on their expectations for students' acquisition of knowledge and standards of performance at the program and institutional levels (and not simply at the course level)?

DQP and Its Implications for Assessment and the WASC Redesign

In their accrediting standards, all regional accrediting organizations include some sort of general reference to the kinds of abilities that baccalaureate degree holders are supposed to have gained as a result of their educational experiences at the college/university level. During the recently completed revision of the WASC Handbook of Accreditation, the Commission named five core competencies in Standard 2.2 and delineated the expectation that baccalaureate degrees will demonstrate student acquisition of at least these five core competencies. Baccalaureate and other degrees must be treated as institutional programs of integrated learning, not simply structures for the accumulation of credits. In the new cycle of accreditation undertaken under this new WASC Handbook, the levels of student learning (goals) and the demonstration of student achievement (outcomes) are going to be even more strongly emphasized than in the past.

At the WASC Academic Resources Conference held recently in San Diego, competency-based education was a "hot" topic. A number of sessions and conversations raised vital questions about the future
of higher education and the value of a university experience. Many of the attendees were interested in learning more about a competency-based approach to learning that would uncouple course material and credit hours and instead focuses on the "direct assessment" of student learning. While some of the impetus for this sort of educational model originates in the enrollment pressures on universities, this movement is hardly new, with Alverno College creating competency-based programs in the 1970s and Western Governors University expanding its on-line offerings in the past 10 years or so. But even these early, relatively small-scale efforts raise issues about how we might define academic rigor and standards for competency-based learning. And these are the sorts of questions which faculty must take seriously and address in the coming years, if we are to maintain the quality and integrity of the educational processes for which we are responsible.

One response to these fundamental concerns about student competence, the meaning and integrity of the degree, and the nature of the educational experience has been led by the Lumina Foundation (luminafoundation.org), which is interested in improving the nation's degree attainment. In 2011, the Foundation presented its DQP—"Degree Qualifications Profile"—an effort to organize a common framework of competencies across the various levels of the educational process (associate, baccalaureate and masters' degrees.) Engaging multiple stakeholders from across the nation, the DQP was an attempt to reframe the conversation about higher education and degree attainment from an emphasis on what's taught to concerns with what's learned. The DQP was intended to set a common, agreed-upon definition of what students actually know, understand and can do at different educational levels in order to highlight common, iterative elements among different degrees, and to highlight, in conscious and public ways, the meanings of different degrees and diverse institutional missions. The DQP provides a framework of specific student learning outcomes that defines what students should know and be able to do with their knowledge at the associate, bachelor, and master levels.

The DQP describes four broad areas of learning: Applied Learning, Knowledge, Skills, and Civic Learning. The outcomes for each area are described separately, although in actuality, the process of earning a degree will require students to integrate them. The DQP was developed to support institutions of higher education in their efforts to develop meaningful assessments that validate and demonstrate student achievement of specific, fundamental educational outcomes. The DQP defines its competencies in ways that are meant to emphasize both the integration of learning from many sources and the application of learning in a variety of settings—in order to help institutions to focus their efforts on improving the quality of the educational experience offered to students.

Given the new and continuing pressures on our institution from our accreditors, our students, and other important stakeholders there is a need to demonstrate—in the clearest and most compelling way—that our educational enterprise is a meaningful, successful, and efficient investment of social resources (fiscal, physical, and emotional). The DQP holds promise as a tool to organize and tell the story of the principles, functions, and objectives of our institutional activities. The DQP offers us a benchmark, a yardstick or a target by which to assess if we are serving our students and our community to the best of our abilities as we train students for a future whose shape is yet unknown.

Note: You can learn more about DQP from the following website: http://learningoutcomeassessment.org/DQPCorner.html
Assessing Core Competencies

Elizabeth Strasser, Faculty Assessment Consultant

The newly redesigned WASC Handbook states that baccalaureate programs must “ensure the development of core competencies including, but not limited to, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and critical thinking.” (WASC Handbook, p. 12). On our campus, these competencies are listed, among others, under the third Baccalaureate Learning Goal of “Intellectual and Practical Skills,” which are to be practiced across the curriculum.

Our Baccalaureate Learning Goals (BALGs) are based on the Essential Learning Outcomes developed by the American Association of Colleges & Universities’ (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative and promulgated by the CSU system’s E.O. 1065. The AAC&U also supported the development of VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics by teams of academics from across the nation to assist in assessing the essential learning outcomes, including the competencies, skills and values listed in our BALGs.

The Office of Academic Program Assessment faculty have suggested to programs that if they have nothing else planned for assessment, they might consider addressing the core competency of critical thinking. The Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric describes critical thinking as “…a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.” The rubric is “designed to be transdisciplinary.” Five dimensions are considered in the rubric: Explanation of issues, Evidence, Influence of context and assumptions, Student’s position, and Conclusions and related outcomes. As with all the VALUE rubrics, four levels of competency are recognized in the rubric, extending from the basic level of Benchmark, to Milestones 2 & 3, and ending at the Capstone level.

Not all five dimensions of the Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric need be used in evaluating student learning. For instance, some disciplines might find that for much of its content, a student’s position is simply not relevant, yet other disciplines will consider a student’s position to be of paramount importance. Clearly there will be disciplinary preferences for some of the dimensions, but most would be applicable to all disciplines housed in the academy. And, if not, the criteria for the dimensions might need to be revised to suit a particular assessment need (see below).

The Written Communication Value Rubric also identifies five dimensions: Context of and purpose for writing, Content development, Genre and disciplinary conventions, Sources and evidence, and Control of syntax and mechanics. It is hard to imagine how any discipline would not find most, if not all, these dimensions to be what one is evaluating in any form of written communication, whether essay, term paper, position paper etc.

Because the LEAP outcomes and the VALUE rubrics are being adopted by many institutions of higher education, it will be possible to engage with colleagues on sister campuses. For instance, we might want to assess how our students are learning our disciplinary outcomes compared to students in the same discipline at sister campuses, and as such, to work collaboratively on improving our students’ learning.

As an example of how programs might use a VALUE rubric as the starting point for assessing student learning outcomes, consider the recent development by GE Area B disciplinary faculty. Area B faculty joined together to develop Area B student learning outcomes (approved by the Faculty Senate, Dec. 1, 2011) and subsequently developed rubrics specific
to those outcomes. The example in Figure 1 is the program learning outcomes for Area B-2 Life Forms. The rubric specific to the second of the Area B-2 outcomes is given in Figure 2, and is directly related to the dimension of the Inquiry and Analysis VALUE Rubric concerning Existing Knowledge, Research, and/or Views. The Area B working group determined that three levels of competency would suffice, with each level normed to the assignment being assessed. This and other life forms rubrics are being successfully used in assessing Area B-2 outcomes.

We anticipate that the other GE Area working groups will find the VALUE rubrics as useful for assessing the outcomes that they are developing for their areas as did the Area B group. Likewise, as more disciplines refine their programmatic outcomes and assessment plans, they too should find the VALUE rubrics to be a great starting point.

**Figure 1**

*Area B-2 Life Forms Program Learning Outcomes*

Students will be able to:

1. Explain and apply core ideas and models in a life science, citing critical observations, underlying assumptions and limitations.

2. Describe how scientists create explanations of natural phenomena based on the systematic collection of empirical evidence subjected to rigorous testing and/or experimentation.

3. Access and evaluate scientific information, including interpreting tables, graphs and equations

4. Recognize evidence-based conclusions and form reasoned opinions about science-related matters of personal, public and ethical concern.

**Figure 2**

*GE Area B2.2 Rubric*

Describe how scientists create explanations of natural phenomena based on the systematic collection of empirical evidence subjected to rigorous testing and/or experimentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Competent (3)</th>
<th>Developing (2)</th>
<th>Novice/Beginning (1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe how scientists create explanations of natural phenomena. (Inquiry and Analysis VALUE Rubric: Existing Knowledge, Research, and/or Views)</td>
<td>Can independently describe accurately how scientists create explanations of natural phenomena and how they collect or test empirical evidence within the overall framework of the discipline.</td>
<td>With instructor guidance describes accurately how scientists create explanations of natural phenomena and how they collect or test empirical evidence.</td>
<td>Shows some familiarity with how scientists create explanations of natural phenomena, may make errors in describing how they collect or test empirical evidence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Writing Program Learning Outcomes

Julian Heather, Faculty Assessment Consultant

Program learning outcomes are the bedrock of program assessment. Without clearly specified learning outcomes, it is impossible to create an effective assessment plan, evaluate student learning, or identify a program's strengths and weaknesses. While the main focus of this article is on learning outcomes, it is important to understand the difference between learning outcomes and learning goals. The WASC Handbook defines a learning goal as “a high-level, very general statement of learning expected of graduates, aligned with the institution’s mission, vision, and values (more specific learning outcomes are derived from goals)” (WASC Handbook, p. 45). The same document defines a learning outcome as follows:

“a concise statement of what the student should know or be able to do. Well-articulated learning outcomes describe how a student can demonstrate the desired outcome; verbs such as “understand” or “appreciate” are avoided in favor of observable actions, e.g., “identify,” “analyze.” Learning outcomes can be formulated for different levels of aggregation and analysis.” (WASC Handbook, p. 46)

These definitions suggest several characteristics shared by learning goals and learning outcomes: both should be stated in terms of the learner, be transparent to all stakeholders, be achievable within the program, and be addressed by the program.

However, learning goals and learning outcomes also differ in important ways. Learning outcomes are more specific than learning goals because they consist of concise statements of what students should learn and/or associated processes in order to achieve learning goals; thus, learning outcomes tend to be in a hierarchical or cause-and-effect relationship to learning goals so that if students achieve a particular learning outcome, they will simultaneously be meeting—probably partially—at least one learning goal. Typically, there will be more learning outcomes than learning goals because the learning outcomes specify the different facets of learning that are represented within a broader learning goal.

The example in Figure 3—from the MS Accountancy program—illustrates the differences between learning goals and learning outcomes. Learning outcomes for this program are more specific and more numerous than learning goals, and there is a clear link between goals and outcomes. More importantly, the learning outcomes illustrate two other crucial characteristics found in the WASC definition: a description of how students demonstrate mastery of an objective (e.g. by producing a report with certain characteristics); and the use of verbs which are “observable” and subject to fewer interpretations (see Figure 4 for more guidance).

The WASC Rubric for Assessing the Quality of Academic Program Learning Outcomes suggests other criteria to consider when developing program learning outcomes. They should provide a complete and well-organized list which focuses on both discipline-specific and institution-wide outcomes (for example, program learning outcomes could be tied to Baccalaureate Learning Goals). Learning outcomes should have explicit criteria statements developed by faculty (for example, rubrics), and they should clearly distinguish expectations for performance at different levels (for example, undergraduate versus graduate programs).

The criteria presented so far can be summarized in a number of questions which can help guide programs in the development of assessable program learning outcomes:

1. Has the program specified clear program learning outcomes?
2. Are there distinct differences in the level of specificity between program goals and program learning outcomes?

(continued on next page)
3. How will achieving program learning outcomes allow students to reach program goals?

4. Are program learning outcomes achievable within the curriculum?

5. Have each of the following been considered in developing program learning outcomes:
   1. Do program learning outcomes focus on the key knowledge, skills and values students learn in the program?
   2. Are the verbs in program learning outcomes clear and unambiguous? Do they describe the observable behaviors by which students will demonstrate learning?
   3. Are the criteria for performance on each program learning outcomes explicit and transparent? (e.g. Are there benchmarks?)
   4. How and where can you observe each program learning outcome?
   5. What expectations do you have for student achievement for each program learning outcome? (e.g. 70% of students will get a particular score)

**Figure 3**

**MS Accountancy Example**

**Goal**
Graduates will demonstrate the ability to develop critical information sets from the wide range of available sources and to communicate that information to the target user.

**Learning Outcomes**
2.1 Students will have the ability to prepare financial information reports tailored to the needs of both external and internal users.
2.2 Students will be able to demonstrate the ability to extract information from relevant databases and other sources, through the use of information technology, for inclusion in reports.
2.3 Students will also be able to prepare internal control reports, audit opinions and other reports useful for both internal and external auditing.
2.4 Students will possess a general knowledge of the type of information system reports needed within an organization. A partial list of areas for which reports are needed include: security and system reliability, effect of technology on internal controls, electronic document management, E-commerce, disaster recovery, data integration and use of enterprise software in the accounting function.

**Figure 4**

**The Importance of Verbs** (Mager, 1975, cited in Brown, 1995)

Verbs Subject to Multiple Interpretations
understand; really understand; appreciate; fully appreciate; grasp the significance of; enjoy; believe

Verbs Subject to Fewer Interpretations
write; recite; identify; sort; solve; construct; build; compare; contrast
Creating Sustainable Assessment Plans
Shannon Datwyler, Faculty Assessment Consultant

Most departments have an assessment plan in place. However, there is frequently a struggle to collect and analyze all of the data that are proposed in the assessment plan. This article is intended to give some pointers for developing a reasonable, sustainable assessment plan.

Characteristics of a Good Assessment Plan

- **Focus on the program**: One of the key points to keep in mind is that the assessment plan should focus on the program rather than on individual courses. While assessment frequently takes place in courses, these assessments should not be focused on course objectives per se, but on the overarching learning outcomes of the program. Ideally, these program learning outcomes will be embedded within the course learning outcomes.

- **Limited number of goals/outcomes**: There is a tendency in academic programs to develop the “perfect” assessment plan that encompasses a large number of goals and outcomes within the program. However, limiting the number of learning outcomes that the department is assessing will allow for a more thorough and thoughtful assessment of the program. Think of the assessment plan as being a six to seven year document rather than a permanent document. At the end of the cycle (i.e., program review cycle), the assessment plan and likely learning outcomes can be modified for the next review period. If you feel that you are responsible for assessing too many outcomes, choose a limited number for the time being and revisit this list during the next cycle.

- **Developed collaboratively**: Too often, assessment falls on the department/assessment chair and there is limited involvement by the department as a whole. Assessment should be a process that involves feedback from all stakeholders (faculty and students) in the program.

- **Plan is manageable and ongoing**: One of the key points here is simply to limit the number of goals and outcomes that are being assessed. Furthermore, be reasonable in the effort that is expended each year for assessment to ensure that this will not put an undue burden on one or a few faculty (and students!). Manageable assessment plans will lead to ongoing assessment of the program. If the assessment plan requires too much work, it will be difficult to assess the program in an ongoing manner.

- **Use multiple methods of data collection**: This can be a simple endeavor. In order to ensure that students are achieving the learning outcomes, departments will certainly need to collect direct data to demonstrate student learning. However, take advantage of the information you can gather from students. Using indirect methods such as student surveys of learning outcomes or student self-assessment can provide a lot of information about how student perception matches with our expectations of student learning.

- **Anticipate how the assessment results will be used**: The whole reason for using assessment is to lead to improvements in student learning. As you are writing your assessment plan, consider what results you are gathering and how this might be used to modify the curriculum or courses to better meet learning outcomes if you find deficiencies.

What Should we Assess?

This is at the center of any assessment plan. The WASC redesign has a strong focus on demonstrating learning in five core competencies (written communication, oral communication, critical thinking, information literacy, and quantitative reasoning) that are seen as key components of any baccalaureate degree program. We suggest including a combination of knowledge-based and skills-based learning outcomes among those that you will assess. Including a combination of core competencies and knowledge within the discipline in the outcomes to be assessed will provide a well-balanced assessment plan.

(Continued on page 8)
Where in the Curriculum Should we Assess?
This is one of the most difficult questions to answer. To determine where assessment should take place, consider developing a curriculum map. Identify where in the curriculum each program learning outcome (PLO) is addressed (i.e., which courses). You may have a program that has an obvious course or experience in which PLOs can be assessed. This would be a capstone or culminating experience. However, not all programs have such experiences. This is where a curriculum map may provide you with useful information. Look for a course (or courses) where students are expected to reach the level of mastery or competency that you hope for students in the major. The Office of Academic Program Assessment would be happy to help your department in developing a curriculum map.

Putting it All Together: Writing Your Assessment Plan
When writing your assessment plan, start by including both a mission statement for the program and the learning outcomes that will be assessed. At the heart of the assessment plan, however, is how and where each of the learning outcomes will be assessed. This will be a comprehensive document and can be presented in a tabular format. Also included in this should be a description of the methods that are used for each assessment method. For direct measures, this will include the signature assignment or other student work that will be used. In addition, be sure to include information on sample sizes, scoring criteria, expected outcomes and rubrics or other means that are used to evaluate the learning outcome. For indirect measures, include information on when and where surveys or student self-assessment will take place. If you choose to use a survey, make sure that the survey includes questions that directly relate to the learning outcomes and not only student satisfaction. For each method, also include the time/date when evidence will be collected and evaluated as well as who will be responsible for gathering, analyzing and reporting the results. It is also helpful to include a brief summary of how the results will be used. For example, if you find that students are not meeting a particular learning outcome, what can be done to improve student learning for that outcome?

While this may seem like a large amount of work, remember that not every outcome must be assessed every year. Be reasonable with your expectations. Focusing on just one or two outcomes each year (see Figure 5) will make this a more reasonable process for faculty and programs.

**Figure 5**

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Summary Report on all assessed PLOs