

To: Chairs

From: Jane Halonen

Re: Assessment Planning Information Tip Sheet #2

Date: September 3, 2004

Gary Howard and I will be collaborating on bringing you some helpful information each week toward our collective goal of developing student learning outcomes in keeping with the university plan. If you were unable to join us for the discussion last week, you can get a copy of the powerpoint presentation or secure the videotape by contacting Gary Howard. We will also be setting up a website as we begin to get good examples that may be useful to you in your planning.

To summarize: We have committed to trying to flesh out department plans that fit with the university plan that includes five "domains:" content, critical thinking, communication, project management, and integrity/values.

For this week's tip sheet we thought we would provide an FAQ to summarize the questions that we are hearing at this stage. We hope you will find this helpful in your planning:

What kind of timeline are we trying to achieve?

During this year, we will be concentrating on your assessment planning in the major. We think it will be most helpful to focus on the following question:

"What should our majors know and be able to do by the time they graduate?"

- **During September**, please discuss and try to draft a good working outline of the program goals that are in concert with the domains we agreed to explore in the general chair session.
- **During the rest of the semester**, we encourage you to work with the department to conduct an "audit" of the curriculum so that you feel confident about the places in the curriculum that students experience the skills that are relevant. BTW this process can sometimes produce some surprises.
- **During the spring semester**, we will move on to selecting assessment strategies that take into account the advantages and constraints that exist in your major.
- **During 2005-6**, we will need to shift attention to general education. It has been a long time since we addressed what happens at the lower level and we will be better prepared to do that once you have identified the graduation outcomes for your major.

Does each program in the major require an ALC?

The Board of Governors has stated that each program that has a cip code should have an assessment plan. If you have specializations that take students in different directions for their advanced work, you may want to have an assessment plan that corresponds to each specialization to make things easier for you to track but BOG is recommending one plan per cip code.

Why shouldn't we just do the minimum required by the state?

Because we are not very advanced in assessment culture on the campus, the ALC mandate comes at a great time for us. With the SACS visit on the horizon, we can embrace the need to respond to the mandate as a focus for our attention. By developing and signing on to a university plan that exceeds the ALC, we can accomplish multiple goals:

1. It will signal to SACS that we understand the work we need to do.
2. It will provide a distinctive "brand" for the UWF education.
3. It will set us apart from other SUS approaches where there may be far greater resistance.
4. Success in this area will give us tremendous political capital and perhaps justification for substantially better funding.

Must we "certify" that each graduating student can achieve the outcomes?

We think this was the spirit originally intended when the BOG selected the concept of the "compact" but it appears that they may be recognizing how challenging this requirement would be especially in the absence of funding. We will continue to advocate that the ALC process should provide program improvement feedback as its focus rather than individual student certification.

At what level should we pitch the program outcomes?

It may be useful to think of students in three general categories: those who don't meet criteria, those who meet basic criteria, and those who far surpass criteria. Your program outcomes should then be pitched to the "basic" group. What is reasonable for the graduate to know and be able to do (not in a stellar, honors level fashion but just a serviceable level)?

Why aren't grades good enough measures of student learning?

We have recently seen a spate of articles that pose some interesting accountability questions. We recognize that grade inflation has become standard across the country. Students expect to earn Bs, not Cs with minimal effort. Research suggests students do far less work outside of class than they used to. How is it then that their grades can be so much better? The conclusion that most taxpayers draw is that we have gotten lazy or that we are pandering to student evaluation feedback so that grades may not be valid indicators. The ALC proposal from the BOG specifically states the assessment plan cannot rely solely on grades.

Can grades play any role in the plan?

YES! Especially if grades represent a defensible description that is linked to the program and course outcomes and even better if the outcomes represent some standard that has been set by more than one professor in the department. To facilitate your understanding of “embedded assessment strategies,” we will be visited by the national expert in this area, Barbara Walvoord of Notre Dame University, in March.

What do you mean by “embedded assessment?”

If we design grades so that they signify defensible levels of performance, grades can be part of the assessment plan. Typically, this means having performance criteria or grading rubrics that are public to assist students in understanding “what you want” in the work that they do for you. If an “A” represents mastery of specified content and relevant skills, then those strategies can work as part of the assessment plan. To the extent that the grading rubrics align with the department outcomes, you will improve the “coherence” of the students’ program and enhance their experience and yours.

What if we want to learn more about this approach now?

We strongly recommend getting a copy of Barbara’s book, *Grading and Assessment*. It may be useful to get a reference copy for your department to facilitate this approach.

Are there other things we can do to gear up?

We are exploring what kinds of experts we can bring in to help us with this agenda. However, we are also excited about the possibility that in some disciplines you will be blazing new trails that might actually lead to some research publications related to pedagogy. This outcome would be another way in which UWF’s embracing the plan could be a distinguishing feature.

Is there any particular format we should try to adopt in developing our ideas?

Although we want to provide a superstructure by offering the university domains, we don’t want to prescribe how your assessment plan should look. We hope that the superstructure will give you a way to “drop in” the student learning outcomes you have been working on to date. You might want to look at the outcomes generated in the most senior course in the program. They may be importable or at the very least give you a good foundation. The only suggestion we will make here is that you should develop at least one program outcome in each domain.

Critical thinking means something different in every discipline. How can we have one set of outcomes for the university plan?

We can’t. The character of critical thinking is different in each discipline, which is why we are asking each department to define what that means for your students. However, it may help to review Bloom’s Taxonomy to get at what we want to accomplish. The goal of our Quality Enhancement Plan is to promote student engagement through active learning. So consider how your departments’

assignments help students learn to apply, evaluate, synthesize, and evaluate, the higher order skills in Blooms Taxonomy. And because we are treating critical thinking very broadly, it can include problem-solving skills and creative productions as well.

What kind of communication outcomes should be included?

What kinds of communications are important in your discipline? We assume you want your students to be able to write about the discipline. Do you also want to hold them accountable for public speaking? For using technology to communicate? Your call.

Isn't an outcome about integrity tricky?

Yes. But it may help to remember that we are not guaranteeing that all students will forevermore make solid ethical decisions. We can hold them to standards for academic integrity and we should embark on a campaign to improve the entire campus in this arena. However, every discipline has some integrity frameworks or ethical codes that can help professionals make good decisions about potential courses of action. We need to help students understand when there are relevant codes of ethics or integrity in the discipline and help them develop the ability to identify when violations occur. The goal of this outcome should be empowering students to make rational and defensible decisions that take into account their values. The public relations value of this particular domain will be enormous.

Why project management?

One of the common characteristics successful UWF students—regardless of major--seem to share is a “can do” attitude which comes from cumulative success in designing and executing projects and doing so in a timely fashion. The kinds of “projects” that your discipline requires may be distinctive, but the ability to move from simple instructions, plan your approach, monitor your progress, and evaluate whether you have finished in style all apply regardless of the product that is produced. In addition, project management gives students an opportunity to try out their leadership skills and to learn to work with people different from themselves. Perhaps most important is helping students develop successful work habits. Psychologists call this skill set “self-regulation.” UWF students who can self-regulate upon graduation will make taxpayers very happy with their higher ed investment.

We've heard of some programs that are pretty ambitious that come up with literally hundreds of outcomes? How many program outcomes are ideal?

Do not attempt to set up a strategy that measures every change students will make during their time with you. What elements are the most prominent? What elements of change are the most measurable? How might you provide evidence for the achievements you know the program is accomplishing. *Keep it simple.*

What's the next step?

Start or continue your department's conversation about what you collectively expect from your graduates. If your discipline has an accrediting agency or a learned society that has been entertaining the question of outcomes, there may be some specific help already developed that can provide a foundation for your department's discussion. If not, use the framework to get people in the department to talk about what their standard expectations should be in those five or six "domains" and you are on your way to establishing program outcomes that will improve how your program holds together.

What happens if we need help?

Please connect with any of the individuals listed below who can give you some feedback on your proposal. If they can't help you directly, they'll try to find out who can.

COPS:	Julie Kinzelman	CUTL:	Gary Howard
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