

Tip Sheet #13

Designing Departmental Assessment Plans

What planning parameters do we need to respond to in order to have a satisfactory assessment plan:

- Should be built on department expectations outlined in ALC.
- Should produce evidence that can be quantified/measured.
- Should take into account both resources and constraints (e.g., size of major, funding, existing curriculum, faculty enthusiasm).
- Should produce feedback to the department about quality and lead to improvement over time.
- Should include one direct measure of student learning and one indirect measure
- Working draft **due May 1**.

What do you mean by “direct” and “indirect” measures?

SACS and consultant Barbara Walvoord recommend a *minimum* of one direct measure of student learning and one indirect measure as the backbone of the departmental assessment plan. Direct measures include any strategy that measures student performance (e.g., exit exam results, capstone performance, portfolio analysis). Indirect measures include “opinions” about quality rather than direct measures of performance: exit surveys, alumni satisfaction surveys, employer satisfaction surveys.

What is the relationship between the ALC we developed and the Assessment Plan we should develop?

Ideally, the student outcomes your department described should lend themselves relatively easily to a “rubric” (set of performance criteria) that could be used directly to provide feedback to students as well as provide continuous feedback about how the department is collectively meeting its promise. For example, the graduation outcomes in the Business department have been converted into a feedback sheet to be used in their integrating capstone. The format of such an approach is simple. Here is an example:

	Exceeds Exp.	Meets Exp.	Fails to Meet	Notes
Outcome 1				
Outcome 2				
Outcome 3..etc.				

Is capstone performance the best strategy?

Since we seem to moving in the direction of highlighting “project management” as our distinguishing feature, it does make sense to try to embed graduating expectations in a capstone course. Embedding a capstone project has many advantages: ease of interpretation, clarity of department thinking about what skills are important, possibility of student self-assessment to shorten grading time.

Must we address every outcome in the strategy? Must we roll out the comprehensive assessment plan all at once?

No to both questions. The critical feature of this administrative obligation is that you generate real data that you can track to offer evidence of the quality of your work and to give you a good idea about where your curriculum needs some work to improve student performance. Based on the nature of the assessment plan you develop, you may want to roll the plan out in segments. [We anticipate that SACs will ask us for follow-up on our assessment plan two years from now. To meet that expectation, departments will need to have interpretable data by May 06.]

What if we find our students aren't performing up to expectations? Are there punishing consequences for departments that report less than stellar outcomes?

The assessment movement promotes a “continuous improvement” process. Rather than striving to represent the department in a Mary Poppins fashion (e.g. “practically perfect in every way”), the point of assessment is to help you figure out what your legitimate weak spots and strengths might be so you can plan accordingly for your future. Our obligation to SACS is not just to develop data storehouses of student performance but actually to use the data to guide our decisions about program refinement. We are committed not to use performance data to punish less than satisfactory outcomes.

Wouldn't it be easy for departments to render "fake" assessment data?

Yes. This is a common problem where academic professionals lack integrity. Doing assessment the right way is a matter of honor. If we at UWF have embraced integrity as one of our central values and distinguishing features, obviously a bogus assessment plan and fake data are unacceptable.

We have way too many students and too many required courses to create a capstone experience for assessment purposes. What's a good way to proceed?

Look at the courses that you offer or require at the 400 level. It may be that you are already asking students to do project related work at the 400 level so those courses are good targets. It may be possible to embed a capstone-like performance in existing course designs. I understand that Philosophy/Religious Studies has adopted a "floating" capstone model. Students can select a 400 level course in which to do some extra mile work that can be monitored by the department.

Our department already has in place a portfolio requirement. How do we intertwine that existing requirement with the ALC framework?

Think about the outcomes in the ALC as a table of contents for the student's portfolio. The student should be selecting evidence that supports achievement of those outcomes.

Portfolios seem to be very helpful to students by prompting them to collect evidence for grad school or job applications, yet the review and management of the portfolios seems pretty daunting. Advice please?

Portfolios are good assessment mechanisms if you have thought through the issues of storage, feedback, and ownership. Some universities are moving to electronic portfolios that are under the control of students but accessible by advisors. Electronic portfolios avoid the storage issues that come up with paper artifacts. To improve the learning experience for students, departments can convene meetings with graduates (in groups) to talk through their experiences as documented in the portfolio and students can be prompted in these sessions to provide improvement feedback to the department. In large departments, these kinds of discussions can be done through sampling the graduates as long as the selection of participants is random to avoid biasing the sample.

We think an exit exam is a good idea. Is that sufficient?

It is sufficient as a direct measure of student learning, but there are some risks in taking this approach. First, typically the performance by students on a multiple choice exit exam tend to disappoint. The challenge is often quite remote in time from the content areas covered in an exit exam and that diminishes student accomplishments. There are also expense, time, security, and motivation challenges in exit exams that make it less desirable to put your eggs in this basket. One other serious limitation with this approach is that it avoids skill development altogether. If we are to promote ourselves as the place students can develop project management skills, probably a more on-target strategy would involve a student-executed project.

Good assessment plans are supposed to have an external component. How does what we are proposing satisfying this criterion?

The fact that the departments collaborated to produce expected graduation outcomes was an important contribution to “externalizing” the assessment process. We plan to build in external blessings on assessment plans through the regular department reviews that will be occurring at UWF. This strategy may shift our attention to hiring external consultants who have some assessment expertise, but the external dimension can easily be built into our existing process.

What’s next on the training horizon?

The next tip sheet—due next week—will address indirect measures, including the use of the NISSE. The following week we will be talking about student self-assessment as probably the last of the tip sheets. Hang in there!