

TIP Sheet #21

Creating a Sustainable and Meaningful Process of Assessment

Update on Assessment Efforts at UWF

First, congratulations to departments on efforts to develop assessments in all educational programs in 2006-2007. Departments have been working hard to develop and maintain credible assessment efforts for undergraduate programs, Academic Foundations (in the General Studies curriculum), and graduate programs. Departments with courses in the General Studies curriculum did a wonderful job creating and implementing embedded assessments for Academic Foundations learning outcomes. Departments with graduate programs are scheduled to complete their assessments of graduate work in the Spring Term, 2007. The assessment of undergraduate programs should continue the work begun last year and complete a second cycle of assessment in 2006-2007.

In our second and final SACS Monitoring Report, we will be expected to provide evidence of the collection and use of assessment data in all educational programs: General Studies (Academic Foundations), undergraduate programs, and graduate programs. This means we need to focus on two components of assessment efforts in each type of educational program:

- Collection of direct measures of student learning
- Use of assessment data for decision making related to teaching and student learning.

How can departments provide evidence that they are using assessment data? Won't all this reporting be burdensome?

Once a year, each department should hold one faculty meeting at which faculty interpret and use the assessment data collected that year. Spring Term would be a logical time for this meeting. Assessment data from the various educational programs should be completed by this time. The meeting would provide a mechanism for making sense of these data while the context in which the data were collected is fresh and memorable. When decisions are made about curriculum and teaching strategies in the spring, faculty will have time to make adjustments to courses that will be offered in the following academic year. In addition, there will be adequate time to develop or revise assessment and to organize, summarize, and document assessment work for the annual report. A copy of the minutes from this assessment meeting should be submitted with the chair's annual report. This strategy should enable departments to address assessment needs in a non-burdensome, sustainable manner.

How might a faculty meeting on assessment be structured to keep the focus on what the assessment data mean?

The faculty discussion of assessment data should include the identification of strengths and weaknesses in student learning observed in the assessment data. Faculty should consider how best to capitalize on student strengths (e.g., showcasing student performance in marketing and recruitment, honoring student achievements, etc.). Faculty should discuss why students appear to be having difficulties in areas judged to be weak and consider changes might create improvements in these areas. In some cases, faculty might consider issues other than specific teaching strategies that have an impact on student learning. Perhaps student learning would improve if students had access to better laboratory equipment, more modern technology (as used

in the field), or if students were able to interact more frequently with models of successful professionals in the field (e.g., through a colloquium series). All educational programs should be addressed in this meeting (student learning in courses the department contributes to the General Studies curriculum, student learning in undergraduate programs, and student learning in any graduate programs offered by the department).

What information about assessment will be needed for annual reports?

Departments will report on assessment activity (and use of assessment data for decision making) for each of the following educational programs that it offers:

1. Course assessments from course(s) the departmental contributes to the General Studies curriculum (Departments currently report assessments on two student learning outcomes and need not report on every course offered in General Studies)
2. Undergraduate programs
3. Graduate programs

For each category of educational program, department chairs will report the following information about assessment activity in the annual report:

1. Description of assessment question(s) and methods used
2. Summary and interpretation of assessment data collected (identification of strengths and weaknesses revealed by assessment data)
3. Description of how the assessment data were used to inform decisions about the curriculum, teaching strategies, and student learning
4. Evaluation of the assessment methods used and description of any modifications planned
5. Identification of assessment questions for the next academic year
6. Copy of the minutes from the assessment meeting

Making sense of assessment data: Reaping the benefits of assessment work

Much effort has been expended on the development of credible embedded assessments and rubrics to use in the evaluation of student work. An important aspect of the assessment effort is the use of data to support the decisions we make about implementing teaching strategies, improving student learning, and addressing curriculum issues. The ultimate goal is continuous and incremental improvement of student learning based on evidence. Thus, the primary function of assessment data is to provide the mechanism by which departments gain information that will guide their decisions about curriculum, teaching, and student learning, basing these decisions on evidence rather than anecdotes, opinion, or intuition.

An important question that departments should ask is: What does the assessment evidence tell them about the strengths and weaknesses of students in their programs? Making sense of assessment data and using these findings to make curriculum decisions is as important as the collection of data. Faculty who are engaged in effective assessment activities are likely to develop new teaching strategies or revise curricula to improve the quality of student learning. These changes will benefit students through improved learning. They will benefit faculty through the satisfaction gained from contributing to improved student learning. Moreover, faculty may also benefit from professional development associated with opportunities to share new teaching strategies through scholarly presentations and publications.

What should faculty focus on when discussing assessment data?

The specific measures created for assessment purposes are useful only insofar as they provide faculty with information about strengths and weaknesses in student learning, each of which provides valuable information for the development of quality educational programs.

How will an analysis of strengths and weaknesses improve educational programs?

1. **Analysis of strengths: What are students doing well?** Identify the features of your program in which students excel. This information can be valuable for marketing and recruitment of students to your program. Identification of strengths will also help faculty identify assignments and activities that produce high quality learning. These assignments and activities need to be protected and preserved. You do not want to accidentally lose some of your best teaching strategies in the heat of a course or program restructuring. Evidence that supports the effectiveness of a course, a class project, or other teaching strategy keeps us focused on which aspects of a program we need to keep.
2. **Analysis of weaknesses: Where are students struggling or encountering difficulties?** Knowing about the areas where students encounter problems can help departments think about interventions that might address these problem areas. What might be done to help students be more successful? Would implementation of a peer tutoring program help students acquire the skills they need? Would a change in advising practices prevent students from floundering because they took a course out of sequence, before they gained the foundation skills developed in a different course? Might a different teaching strategy produce a higher success rate among students in this skill? The analysis of weaknesses might suggest interventions such as providing additional support for student learning, revising the curriculum, or adopting new teaching strategies that might improve student learning. Assessments conducted after changes are introduced will inform faculty of the success of these modifications.

What questions might be raised during a discussion of assessment evidence?

The list below identifies some of the questions posed and decisions a department might make based on the interpretation and discussion of assessment data:

- How might student learning improve if a new class were developed to address a specific issue or set of skills?
- Would students be more successful if prerequisite courses were established so that students would complete courses in which skills are introduced before enrolling in more advanced courses?
- Should student learning outcomes for a program be modified? Has the focus of the discipline changed recently, suggesting the need for additional or different learning outcomes?
- Might student learning improve if instructors adopted a different teaching strategy or if students completed different types of assignments?
- Do the current assessment methods provide useful information? Was the quality of information provided by this year's assessments disappointing? Would a different approach to collecting assessment data provide more useful information?

This will take a lot of time and effort. How do departments and faculty benefit from all this work?

Departments that use assessment data to motivate discussions of these issues will benefit greatly from the insights gained about student learning and ideas generated for program improvements. Over time, as programs increase in quality and departments derive tangible evidence of the quality of their programs from assessment data, they should be more successful in their efforts to attract and retain students in their programs.

Faculty who develop and adopt new teaching strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies with assessment data will be in a position to contribute to the scholarship of teaching in their discipline, either through a presentation at a teaching conference or a publication in a scholarly journal. Thus, an effective use of assessment data may have an added benefit to individual faculty in terms of their productivity in scholarship and research as well as in improved quality of teaching. Faculty will also benefit from their reputation in the university as effective teachers.