Assessment Notes
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An occasional posting of questions and answers, suggested readings, and upcoming events in the Office of Academic Assessment

Assessment Update

As of today, there are 64 units in Academic Affairs working on assessment plans including curricular programs, co-curricular programs, centers, and other administrative units. Of these, 32 are completed in TracDat and another eight lack just one item.

Departments and programs will have their first chance to enter data into TracDat at the end of Fall semester. Information about major competency, oral competency, and computer/technology competency will be entered for students graduating in December. (For more on this topic, see the FAQs section below).

We’re also working to help everyone understand the relationship between the various initiatives associated with assessment and reaffirmation. You might want to take a look at the attached document, Navigating the Alphabet Soup, for a concise description of the relationship between assessment plans, institutional effectiveness, SACS reaffirmation, and the QEP (Quality Enhancement Plan).

Biennial Reporting Update

Our practice has been to write biennial reports every other year to summarize our assessment activities. The next biennial reporting cycle ends in May 2011 with reports due in June.

Because outcomes and assessment data will be entered into TracDat, we plan to use its reporting feature to generate the actual information about performance on outcomes and goals. Chairs/directors will have an opportunity to provide a narrative to accompany the data report, but the major portion of the reporting process will be automated. (For more on these topics, see the Upcoming Events section below).

FAQs—Answers to the most frequently asked questions of Fall semester

1. I’m getting confused: Do we have to assess every outcome every semester? Every year?
Because we are attempting a complete pilot of assessment plans this year, each department/program/unit will assess all competencies this year. That will provide a complete data set for discussions about the need to revise plans for the next biennial cycle (2011-2013). This will not be our regular practice in the future. In a complete biennial cycle, each outcome must be assessed at least once—preferably twice—but it's not necessary to assess every outcome every semester or year.

2. So why do we have to collect assessment data every semester?

Although we conduct assessments annually, in some cases we may need to collect some data every semester. Sometimes a course is only offered in Fall or Spring so we have to collect the data when it's offered. Students graduate in Fall and Spring so we assess major competency, oral competency, and computer/technology competency every semester.

3. Why can’t we use course grades to assess a student learning outcome (SLO)?

It’s not that you never can use course grades; it’s just that very specific conditions must be met for course grades to be valid. In many classes, course grades reflect a wide variety of kinds of student work of which only some may be directly relevant to a particular SLO. In addition, faculty often include other variables in their course grade metrics such as attendance, class participation, and extra credit. A simpler approach is to identify specific kinds of student work within a course to assess an outcome such as a paper, project, or presentation. In some cases, the grade on a final exam might be appropriate too. The key question to ask is: Does this particular evaluation of our students focus directly on the knowledge and skills identified in the outcome?

4. Two, three, four, five—how many levels of performance should a good rubric include?

The most common pattern for rubrics is four levels. The idea is to separate performance into the four most often seen categories: below average (not meeting the competency), average (meeting the competency), above average (better than minimal competency), and outstanding (true evidence of mastery).

A two-level rubric or checklist may be appropriate to assess competency but at least three levels are needed to assess mastery, an important issue when asking how we can improve what we do. Competency is a low bar and we expect most people to reach it. But to provide a truly great education, our goal is to increase the proportion of students who are more than competent, who in fact show evidence of true mastery of
information/skills. A rubric with two levels can’t distinguish between those students. Personally, I prefer four point scales over five point scales because I think the latter may overtax the evaluator without necessarily adding to what we learn from the assessment. But if you’re game to try them, feel free. Our inter-rater reliability analyses will help us figure out if they are working well or not.

5. What about anchors: Is it OK to have a rubric in which we say the student is excellent, very good, good, etc?

Scale anchors are extremely helpful when more than one person will be using a rubric. Although we may think we agree, for example, on what “excellent” means we tend to be more consistent—both individually and in groups—if there are a few phrases or sentences that suggest what “excellent” means in this particular context. If we are consistent, the rubric is more reliable, and a reliable rubric is what we want at the end of the day. (For more on this topic, see the Upcoming Events section below).

Upcoming events—A look ahead to Spring and Summer semesters

1. Adding operational goals

Because Academic Affairs includes departments, programs, academic support units—just about every kind of university “thing”—TracDat provides an opportunity for entering both student learning outcomes and operational goals. With a few exceptions, each group so far has focused pretty much on just one side of the equation: SLOs for departments and programs, operational goals for everyone else. During Spring semester, we want to offer departments and programs an opportunity to enter some operational goals too—with help, of course.

For academic departments and programs, operational goals are the input side of the teaching/learning equation. Departments hire excellent faculty who carefully craft curricula, teach courses in creative and engaging ways, and evaluate students through a variety of assignments and tasks. This is the “opportunities to learn” side of the equation which has a tremendous influence on whether students are able to master our learning objectives.

What might be included as an operational goal? How about studying the pattern of course offerings to make sure students can make reasonable progress toward graduation? Or considering curricular revisions? Perhaps expanding opportunities for
undergraduate research or service learning? Once Spring semester gets underway, I’d like to meet with each chair/director and liaison to brainstorm ideas for this component.

2. Developing a new biennial reporting template

As mentioned above, reports on assessment data now will be run from TracDat itself, a change that requires a change in what chairs/directors write for their biennial reports. During Spring semester, I plan to work with a small group of chairs/program directors to develop a template for this “cover letter” component to biennial reporting. If you’re interested in participating, please let me know.

3. Workshop on rubrics

One goal of our pilot assessment work this year is to learn about the rubrics we have developed. Hopefully, we will learn that most of them work well but even a rubric that works could be improved. During Spring semester, I plan to offer a workshop on rubrics that focuses on how to distinguish between competency and mastery of learning objectives through careful definition of scale anchors. Be on the lookout for an announcement in late January or early February.

4. Stipend opportunities for work on the core competency project

The core competency project is our first attempt at a comprehensive assessment of the ILS program. It began last summer when we worked with ILSOC and ILS coordinators to identify competencies that (1) connect to our University Student Learning Outcomes and (2) are developed in at least one ILS component. The result was a set of nine short prompts that were completed by entering students during Fall 2010 and will be completed by graduating students who entered as freshmen (i.e., ILS completers) in December 2010 and May 2011.

Now the fun begins: Directly after commencement in May, I will be offering two stipend opportunities for faculty to assist with the next stage of the process. First, I will need a group of 27 faculty—three per competency—to develop rubrics for evaluating student responses. Next, I will need another group of 27 faculty—three per competency—to apply those rubrics to the responses we collect this year.

Stipends will range from $250 to $500. Dates for the project will be announced in March or April.