

Assessment of Student Learning

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A Dean's Perspective

By B. Oliver Walter, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences

The drive for assessment came to my attention, as dean, during the early 1990s. Then, the most common response was to attack the rationale for assessment and treat it as a passing irritant. As a university, we did generate assessment statistics for each department and program. For example, our assessment statistics included the number of majors, the number of students per class, and so on. These were soon dismissed as not germane to “authentic” assessment.

A major dilemma when asked to assess our educational objectives is that those that are easier to measure are frequently trivial, while our major objectives such as creating life-long learners are nearly impossible to measure at least in the short run. Encouraging trivial measurements becomes time-constraining, yet serves as a quick and doable substitute for more complex evaluations. Unfortunately, a common response is, “If we can’t do a perfect job of assessment, we should not do it at all.” Doing nothing is not an option and to advocate doing so is an indictment of our abilities to evaluate the educational quality of our basic mission.

It is clear to all who have contemplated assessment that no single approach or method is entirely satisfactory. Valid assessments require a host of measurements thoughtfully applied and interpreted. UW has administered a university-wide student satisfaction survey



since the early 1990s. Student satisfaction is an important measure when assessing university performance, but truthfully, student satisfaction with a class or a professor says little about what the student has learned.

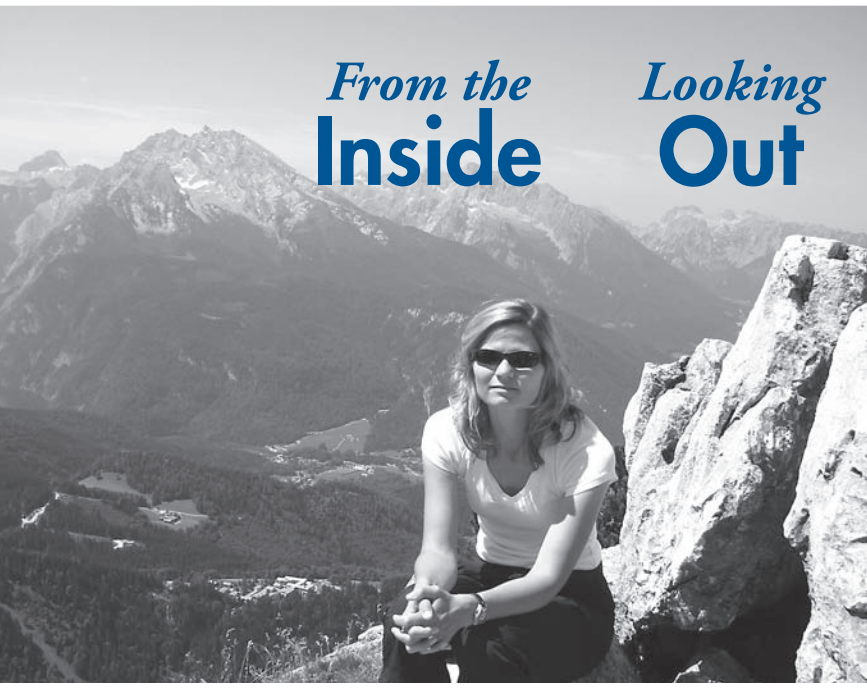
In response to the *U.S. News* rankings of American universities, a ranking that depends heavily on the wealth of the university, the National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE) was created a number of years ago. The NSSE includes an extensive list of items that question freshmen and seniors about their educational experiences. Here again, we do not have an instrument that directly measures student learning, but a great deal can be implied from the answers to the NSSE questions. Moreover, hundreds of universities participate in NSSE and thus we can compare UW student responses to those of other universities nationwide. UW students completed the Web administered survey in 2005 and 2007.

For instance, students are asked how often they come to class without completing readings or assignments. All things equal, one could certainly say that the higher the percentage of students doing so, the lower the quality of the educational experience. Twenty-eight percent of UW freshmen indicated that they came to class unprepared *often* or *very often*. As noted, one advantage of NSSE is that it allows us to select a peer group of universities.

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From the Inside Looking Out



Erika at Hitler's Eagle's Nest Retreat in Berchtesgaden, Germany this summer.

Full semester was certainly eventful with regards to UW's continued efforts to assess student learning. Perhaps the biggest and most successful event was this October's *Pathways for Learning* forum. Both keynote speakers, Peter Ewell and Cathy Small, were excellent. I spoke with a number of people after these sessions to get feedback on what they were hearing, and I learned that there was a genuine excitement about some of the issues and points brought up by both speakers. This informal feedback, along with the formal evaluations from the various sessions, has provided Jane Nelson and me with a lot of ideas for future programming. Check out the ECTL's Web site and your campus mailboxes for more information about spring semester events.

Peter Ewell provided me with a lot of ideas on how to get the university as a whole more focused on examining the data we have already collected. Not only is this a UW challenge, it is a challenge at most colleges and universities as it is difficult to systematically evaluate the meaning of our assessment data and put it in an appropriate context. Look for more about these data issues in the future. I expect to write a series of smaller papers aimed at not only sharing data, but serving as a beginning point for answering questions about what these data mean. UW is data rich right now. We have results from the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement and for the second round of Collegiate Learning Assessment testing. I am also expecting results (hopefully by the

end of spring semester) regarding our participation last year in the "Parsing the First-Year Experience" project. If you are interested in the results of these studies or would like more information about them, please contact me.

Cathy Small's talks were very insightful as well. I really enjoyed reading *My Freshman Year*, and her presentations really made it more personal. Cathy shared many of her ideas for new programming and different approaches to teaching and learning based on her experiences. I found her to be a delightful, truly caring woman who never imagined the widespread interest in her book. Immediately after her departure, I read another book she mentioned while at UW. It is called *Generation Me* by Jean Twenge. This is a fairly quick read and is a nice complement to Cathy's work. It offers a glimpse into the lives of today's 18 to 35 year olds, many of whom are current college students. Twenge's methodology though is very different as she looks at survey data from various measurement tools for hundreds of thousands of young people since the 1950s to describe Generation Me (those born after 1970). Although it is not specifically about assessment of student learning, it is very relevant to explaining common behaviors and attitudes that we encounter daily on a college campus—I highly recommend it. Both books helped me to understand why I have such a difficult time getting students to participate in university-level assessment studies on a volunteer basis.

Many of the articles in this edition of the Assessment of Student Learning newsletter were included because of their connections to an assessment related topic from the *Pathways for Learning* forum event. Their purpose is to either clarify something that came up during this week or to talk about an issue that emerged from the sessions. I hope you find them useful in helping your department move its student learning assessment efforts along. In closing, I would like to offer my continued assistance with your assessment of student learning projects. My contact information is ekprager@uwyo.edu or 766-2897. Also, if you have ideas for the Web site or newsletter, please let me know. I am genuinely interested in obtaining feedback to improve UW's coordination of its assessment efforts. Have a great spring semester!

Erika K. Prager

University Assessment Specialist

IN THE spotlight:

College of Education Assessment— Accomplishments and Challenges

By Kay Persichitte, Director/Professor, Office of Teacher Education

Most folks you talk to today would agree that there exists a high level of concern about the general quality of public education in our nation. That concern is inevitably linked to issues of quality for the teachers and other school personnel who are frontline in our schools. Interestingly, national surveys indicate that parents are concerned about the quality of classroom teachers in general, but they have very positive opinions about the quality of the teachers in their local school. Such dichotomies of perception and expectation are the foundation of much political decision making as the

accountability of teachers, principals, other school personnel, and the colleges who prepare new professionals for education continues to make headlines. In the College of Education (CoEd), we are focused on the three “As”: Accountability, Assessment, and Action as we strive to *DEVELOP COMPETENT AND DEMOCRATIC PROFESSIONALS*.

Accountability

Across undergraduate and graduate programs, we have identified learner outcomes that set a floor and a target for the performance of the future teachers and other school personnel who complete our programs. Learner outcomes for each program are aligned with the three general CoEd outcomes stated in our conceptual framework: competence, democratic perspectives, and professionalism. Our accountability extends beyond university units to students in our programs; the hundreds of school-based professionals outside the university who mentor our students in a variety of field experiences; state education agencies (the Wyoming Professional Teaching Standards Board (PTSB) and the Wyoming Department of Education); many national professional organizations (e.g., the National Council of Teachers of English); a national accreditation organization (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education); and ultimately, the children in the classrooms and schools where our graduates will work.

Assessment

It would be particularly difficult to claim accountability to constituencies



without data from the monitoring of individual performance. So, we are actively engaged in the assessment of our students’ knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions relevant to each program’s standards. Each program has developed an assessment plan for the collection, archival, analysis, and dissemination of assessment data. These plans range from very simple to rather complex and each includes components that allow us to monitor aspects of program effectiveness as well. Each plan also includes at least one assessment of our students once they have completed their program. Student assessments are aligned with at least two sets of professional standards: those of the specific discipline and those of the CoEd or PTSB. We are learning, too, about the importance of implementing the assessment cycle early on to avoid data overload, over/under assessment of specific outcomes, and

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Our Assessment Cycle

Learner Outcomes



Align Outcomes with
Professional Standards



Develop Assessment Plan
(including who, when, how, and
how often learner data will be collected)



Identify/Create Assessments
Required in the Plan



Implement the Assessments



Analyze Data



Disseminate Analyses



Data-Driven Decision Making
(curricula, staffing, learner support,
resource allocation, scheduling,
program planning for the future)

spotlight

Partners in Student Learning

By John Nutter, Assistant to the Vice President of Student Affairs

Student learning as defined by Richard Keeling, contributing editor of *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-wide Focus on the Student Experience*, as “an integrated, holistic, transformative activity that incorporates and intertwines academic learning and student development.” There are both academic and developmental elements of student learning, which should not be thought of as separate or separable.

When environments are conducive to both learning and developing, and when learning activities are intentionally planned and implemented with specific outcomes in mind, student learning and development will happen with more depth and efficiency. Student learning outcomes, therefore, should reflect the results of these intertwined processes, according to Keeling.

The components of academic learning and student development in the wide array of learning activities will vary, at all levels. Consequently, the desired student learning outcomes should reflect elements of both.

Cathy Small, upon her visit to UW last October, helped us recognize that today’s students are different from their predecessors of past decades. They learn in new and different ways. Their associations with peers are formed differently. Their communication channels are varied and influenced significantly by new technologies. These differences call for new approaches to student learning.

New approaches can define student learning outcomes at multiple levels. They can be targeted for individual activities (such as an assignment for a course, an event, or a co-curricular project), for groups of linked activities (an entire course, a sequence of leadership development projects, or career planning efforts), for a curriculum (general education courses, majors and minors, or the out-of-classroom experience as a whole), or for the institution (the net outcomes of all undergraduate learning experiences, taken together).

Student learning outcomes should be linked and consistent across the institution. The learning outcomes for a major or for a student affairs department should reflect and respond to the overall intended institutional learning outcomes. Furthermore, learning outcomes for individual activities or



groups should reflect and respond to the learning outcomes for the curriculum/objectives of which those activities are a part.

There are several examples of learning outcomes which lend themselves to input from varied institutional resources. Leadership development, benefits of diversity, good citizenship practices, and intellectual curiosity are just a few examples.

Small found that current college students favor active, concrete learning. This suggests that service learning opportunities for applying classroom knowledge to day-to-day life situations is an effective method of helping students to grasp con-

cepts and see the impacts of varying perspectives. She also learned that college students of the twenty-first century like to be problem solvers. Partnerships which allow classroom education to be applied in out-of-classroom experiences, whether through internships, club and organizational participation, volunteer opportunities, or special projects, dramatically increase the potential for student learning.

Student learning outcomes at the institutional level should be specific and contextual, observes Keeling. Each institution must establish outcomes that reflect its mission, goals, social and cultural context, history, and student population. Likewise, departmental, program, and activity outcomes must be measurable and clearly link to desired outcomes at higher levels.

Learning Reconsidered, a monograph prepared under the auspices of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrations (NASPA) suggests seven institutional-level learning outcome groups:

- ▶ Cognitive complexity
- ▶ Knowledge acquisition and application
- ▶ Academic achievement
- ▶ Intra- and inter-personal competence
- ▶ Practical knowledge
- ▶ Humanitarianism
- ▶ Civic engagement

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Pathways for learning

Pathways for Learning a Success

By Jane Nelson, Director, Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning

Thanks to the collective work of seven co-sponsors, the 2007 Fall Pathways for Learning forum drew an excellent attendance, generated spirited discussions, and stimulated plans for further work. On October 15, assessment expert Peter Ewell launched the week-long series of events with a plenary talk in which he located UW's work in the national landscape of assessment. Cathy Small, author of *My Freshman Year*, ended the week with a focus on how students realistically make their way through the maze of higher education.

For the five-day forum, the organizers created more than a dozen events that featured University of Wyoming faculty speakers as well as outside experts. These events included two plenary talks, numerous one-hour panel presentations and discussions, informal sessions with the plenary speakers, and a three-hour workshop about departmental assessment. Thanks to the co-sponsorship of the Wyoming School-University Partnership, the events drew attendance from statewide public school and community college faculty, as well as from University of Wyoming faculty, staff, and students.

For 2008, multiple follow-up activities will build on the discussions generated during the Pathways for Learning forum. Several groups are planning ways to link academic classes with service learning and leadership experiences. New freshman interest groups (FIGs) are being created for fall 2008, and LeARN is also beginning to plan a substantial increase in other learning communities for first-year students. In April, several of the forum co-sponsors will launch a series of statewide programs entitled "Teaching Writing in Wyoming" with a campus visit by literacy scholar Deborah Brandt. This summer, the Ellbogen Center will sponsor a book discussion of *Inside the Undergraduate Experience* (2007), a book highly recommended by Peter Ewell. As usual, free copies of the book will be distributed prior to the discussions. In fall 2008, the College Assessment Coordinators will sponsor a series of workshops featuring some of the excellent data analyses already completed by several UW departments and programs.

Peter Ewell and Cathy Small also left us with some challenges to consider. The university's assessment work should

reveal both the strengths of our students' learning and the gaps that exist in our teaching and subsequent learning. Assessment should tell us where we need to change. One challenge is to identify the best pathways for facilitating these changes. A second challenge is to recognize and address continuing difficulties with diversity that we collectively experience as a faculty, staff, and student body. Again, assessment can be a powerful tool to help us identify where, when, and how we can improve learning so that our students can become creative, dynamic citizens in a global society.



Faculty and staff discuss assessment complexities and challenges at a Pathways for Learning workshop aimed at department and program level assessment.

Clarifying Direct vs. Indirect Measurement in the Assessment of Student Learning

By Audrey Shalinsky, Associate Dean, The College of Arts & Sciences

Developing appropriate and specific ways to measure student learning is a crucial step in the assessment cycle. After department or program faculty have carefully considered and agreed on learning outcomes for a particular degree program, they decide where and how these learning outcomes will be measured. Measurement allows for the collection and analysis of data, and eventually the discussion of whether outcomes have been achieved or changes are needed to enhance student learning.

A good assessment plan requires two types of measures—direct and indirect. It is important to understand the value of each and the ways they may be utilized. Many departments at the University of Wyoming began using indirect measures to examine student experiences in their majors well over ten years ago. Department heads conducted exit interviews with graduating seniors and faculty committees designed surveys to send to alumni, asking them to think about their classes and their success in their chosen careers. These two types of indirect measures are still used to supplement information about student learning today.

Generally, indirect measures such as exit interviews or focus groups offer students and/or alumni the opportunity to reflect about their learning. In other words, they are types of self-



reports. Because of this, they should not be used as the only measures of student learning. Self-reports can be unreliable and individuals may think they learned more (or in some cases less) than they really did. Other indirect measures may be only loosely linked to specific learning outcomes. For example, tracking student admission to graduate programs or to careers may provide insight to student success. One assumes student success has something to do with what was learned in the major or even in college as a whole, but it is difficult to know exactly how success is linked to learning.

The “gold standard” of measurement today is the direct method in which

student work, the product of learning, is evaluated by faculty committee. Direct measures are specifically linked to outcomes as faculty members examine various curricula and determine where outcomes are best measured. Measurement in the assessment process is independent of course grading and generally involves the creation and use of rubrics for the evaluation of student work. Student work may take a variety of forms including essays, embedded test questions, research papers, presentations, performances, portfolios, and standardized tests. Work may be pulled from different courses and at different levels in the major. Many departments try to understand how their students’ learning develops as they move from lower to upper division courses so they sample work at different stages and use a common rubric for evaluation.

Just as good undergraduate programmatic assessment should contain both direct and indirect measures, graduate program assessment also should incorporate both forms. An example of a direct measure in a graduate program is the development of a rubric based on learning outcomes used to evaluate the dissertation, thesis, or Plan B paper. An example of an indirect measure is tracking the number of publications or conference presentations by a graduate student cohort, having set a benchmark for student research proficiency.

We are on the Web!

www.uwyo.edu/acadaffairs/assessment

A Dean's Perspective Continued from page 1

Only 21 percent of freshmen enrolled in our peer group comparison claimed they came to class unprepared—not a positive comparison! Twenty-five percent of UW seniors answered in a similar manner—26 percent of the peer group seniors. Students were asked how often they prepared two or more drafts of a paper before turning it in. Again, all things being equal, the more often, the better. For UW freshmen, 59 percent replied that they did so *often* or *very often* (peer group freshman—55 percent, a positive comparison). The figure of seniors was 51 percent (45 percent for peer group seniors, again a positive for UW).

I believe that the capstone experience provides faculty with a superb opportunity to measure the educational aptitude of our students. According to the NSSE, 64 percent of our seniors have either taken or plan to enroll in a capstone course, a percentage that is nearly identical to national

averages. Undoubtedly, the definition of a capstone experience varies across disciplines. In a recent report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities entitled “College Learning for the New Global Century” a capstone course was defined as follows: “At the senior level, a capstone project or thesis in the major culminates the inquiry approach to learning by asking students to draw on the knowledge and skills acquired in the major, general education, electives, and co-curricular experiences.” One of the goals in the A&S *AP II* was that all requirements for majors include a capstone experience. We are not there yet, but have made substantial progress. In sum, anyone who has considered the assessment challenge seriously is well aware that it is no simple task but through a variety of measures, including NSSE, we do have the ability to reach approximate conclusions.

College of Education Assessment Continued from page 3

to allow for the development of digital supports to meet reporting needs.

Action

It is the final element of the assessment cycle—data-driven decision making—that results in the activities which drive “assessment” in the CoEd. We are striving to make best use of the data we collect with a focus on continuous improvement. The target of “improvement” is sometimes at the individual student level and sometimes at the program level; sometimes aimed at short-range objectives and sometimes at long-range objectives, but the conversation about learner assessment data inevitably leads to action(s). We have learned that assessment of student learning is never

done. As we prepare for our national accreditation review this February, new discussions are emerging about the need to revise and refocus several of our assessment plans, revise certain assessment instruments, and an appropriate timeline to connect these actions with *Creating the Future* and *AP III*.

John Dewey said, “If we teach today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow.” As we prepare teachers and other school personnel, we must be sensitive to this challenge on two levels: how we teach and how our graduates will teach. Continued partnerships and collaborations with internal and external constituents are mandatory as we document our accountability and chart the course for future actions.

Partners in Student Learning Continued from page 4

These seven “domains” capture groups of student learning outcomes which can be shared across the institution—by faculty, student services staff, and students. A thoughtful examination of this and similar lists will quickly elucidate the fact that the elements of student learning are found in much of what we do, regardless of our role in the university.

As partners in this process, we can join in creating an environment that supports and encourages student learning.

Cathy Small encourages us to “bridge the gap between academic and social experiences.” Our students will face a rapidly changing world when they leave us; we must give them the skills to apply their knowledge in a plethora of situations. The more varied the opportunities for learning we give them, the more successful they can be.



Mark Your Calendar

Considering the First-Year Experience at UW

Wednesday, March 12, 2008 from 12–1 p.m., ECTL, Coe 307

Learn what UW knows about the first-year experience of its students. Erika Prager, university assessment specialist, will present relevant data from various institutional level studies including, but not limited to the NSSE and CLA.

Teaching Writing in Wyoming

Friday, April 18 through Saturday, April 19, 2008

Come join instructors from multiple disciplines, who teach writing at various levels, for a two day workshop on writing instruction throughout the state. For more information contact April Heaney, LeaRN Director at aprilh@uwyo.edu.

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