

Academic Matters

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FROM THE INTERIM PROVOST:

This issue of *Academic Matters* is focused on assessment. As many of you recall, in March 2003 the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association visited our institution for the purposes of reaccreditation. A major concern that came out of their visit related to our institution's assessment program. The team indicated the following:

Although a pattern of good intention and some meaningful assessments are apparent, a comprehensive and systematic program for assessing student learning has not been developed. An assessment program must include expected student learning outcomes that are articulated in measurable terms, direct measures of student learning and thorough analysis of data. Results must be used to improve student learning and inform planning and allocation of resources.

To demonstrate that we are meeting the challenge above, we are required to submit a monitoring report to the HLC which is due in September of 2006. In that report, we must show progress in implementing a comprehensive and systematic program for the assessment of student learning informed by the HLC guidelines. Specifically, the team communicated the following expectations:

The report will document the implementation of a program of assessment of student learning at course, program, and institutional levels. The report will document that the UW Colleges has:

- ∞ defined its proficiencies in measurable terms,
- ∞ collected direct measurement data on both proficiencies and breadth of knowledge,
- ∞ used the resulting data to inform improvements to courses and programs,
- ∞ measured the effectiveness of such changes, and
- ∞ used the data on student learning to influence planning and resource allocation.

Over the past two years, our institution has made strong progress toward meeting the expectations stated above. In this issue of *Academic Matters* you will learn about the recent accomplishments of the UW Colleges' assessment program, the assessment of distance education courses, the assessment activities around new student orientation that are taking place in Student Services, the link between assessment and good grant writing, and the progress made toward assessing aesthetic skills.

As the 2004-2005 academic year comes to a close, I want to thank all of you for your very hard work and continued commitment to assessing student learning and to the UW Colleges' overall assessment program. It is through the hard work of the faculty, instructional and professional staff, administration, and students that so much progress has been made and that we are moving toward fostering a culture of assessment.

Institutional Assessment: A Brief Review of Recent Accomplishments
By Wava Haney and Renee Gralewicz

In 2003, the Higher Learning Commission found the UW Colleges did not have a sufficient comprehensive and systematic process to evaluate teaching and learning and the many services that support that central institutional mission. While not finding fault with student learning, their concern was that we needed to have more evidence that assessment of learning was taking place and the results informing our teaching. We needed to create a culture of assessment they wrote.

As we prepare our next interim institutional assessment report for institutional review, it is clear that since 2003 the UW Colleges has made a number of major changes in its assessment processes. Indeed, we have come a long way in a short time. The changes are enabling academic departments to monitor more closely their teaching and engage in dialogue about how to help students meet performance standards on institutional and department learning outcomes.

In fact, among the important accomplishments made in the report period is the reduction in the number of institutional proficiencies. The Senate Assessment Committee, the SAC, with the Department Assessment Coordinators, the DACs, worked diligently for two years to revise the list of 28 proficiencies into four proficiencies with from two to six measurable performance indicators. At the beginning of 2005, two performance indicators for the fourth proficiency, aesthetic skills, were agreed to just in time to be printed in the 2005-2007 UW Colleges Catalog. The previous year, the UW Colleges Senate approved a mission statement for our assessment program. The assessment mission statement makes explicit our goals: to assess curriculum, programs and services that nurture students' intellectual development. Developing an assessment mission statement and streamlining our proficiencies as well as giving them visibility in institutional documents and on the institution's website address several major concerns of the Higher Education Commission.

Responding to and meeting three additional concerns of the HLC will also be documented in the institutional assessment report currently being drafted. We now have widespread involvement of faculty and instructional academic staff in the assessment process and that has provided a strong data base that we use to assess our Associate Degree program. The data base also permits us to compare students' scores on different proficiencies with other performance indicators like scores on standardized tests (e.g., ACT or SAT) and grades in university courses (i.e., GPA). But one of the most exciting parts of the report will be case studies of an array of approaches to assessment from

our academic departments on both basic proficiencies and department specific learning objectives, and the steps underway in departments to use assessment data to improve teaching and learning – to close the loop as we say. The DACs have provided leadership at the department level on measuring the skills we expect all students to demonstrate along with department specific learning objectives.

In the current academic year, we took another important step toward the development of a culture of assessment. We identified another set of faculty and instructional academic staff colleagues to provide leadership at the campus level—the Campus Assessment Coordinators (CACs). For these colleagues, the challenge is not to develop more assessment instruments but to generate a campus-wide discussion of assessment and develop campus-specific approaches to using the results from assessment activities in the academic departments and the functional units to improve curricular and co-curricular programs and activities.

On May 25th, the SAC will meet with the DACs and the CACs to continue our efforts to generate meaningful data that integrates the three levels of assessment – department, campus and institution. Our colleagues will take up some continuing challenges – for example, reviewing issues of validity and reliability of our measures. But the interim report being prepared for institution wide review at the beginning of the next academic year will certainly point to a lot of achievements on assessment by the UW Colleges in a two year period. These achievements are the result of the hard work of the Senate Assessment Committee, Department Assessment Coordinators, the Institutional Assessment Coordinators and the Senior Information Manager, as well as our Interim Chancellor and Provost.

Assessment in Distance Education Courses
By Shirley Hensch/Barbara Stinson

The focus of UW Colleges assessment extends to all courses, no matter what their delivery mode, including those offered to all 13 campuses through Distance Education (DE).

For those courses identified as “non-online DE,” including Compressed Video (CV) and Wisline Web (WLW), DE relies on the departments and campus curriculum committees for content assessment, just as with face-to-face classes. Department committees and chairs are invited to use appropriate technology to make class visits for assessment purposes and students fill out evaluations through the DE office in accordance with senate policy. Additionally, the DE staff works with Instructional Technology Services, Information Technology, and the UWC instructional technologist to continually assess the technology involved.

For the courses taught through UW Colleges Online, faculty and instructional academic staff are expected to take part in the Institutional Assessment Program just as they would at a regular campus. Whenever possible this should be done using assessment instruments developed by department assessment committees. When faculty and academic staff teach the same course both online and face-to-face in a given semester, the institutional assessment should be carried out in the online class, rather than the face-to-face class. In this way, there is no loss of data to either the institution or to the departments, and information is gathered about students’ mastery of analytic, quantitative, and communication performance indicators for courses taught online.

When a faculty or IAS member conducts a departmentally-developed assessment in his or her online class, no additional assessment is done. However, if the faculty or IAS member does not conduct a departmentally-developed assessment in his or her online class, then one of the online-specific rubrics should be used to assess student learning. Currently, there are rubrics developed for three of the institutional performance indicators:

- ∞ A6 (Gather and assess information from printed sources, electronic sources, and observation); for online courses this performance indicator focuses on the use of electronic sources.
- ∞ C1 (Read, observe, and listen with comprehension and critical perception); for online courses this performance indicator focuses on reading with critical perception.
- ∞ C5 (Use computer technologies for communication); for online courses this performance indicator focuses on communication through email and discussion boards.

These procedures help to ensure that UWC distance education courses are fully integrated into the UW Colleges ongoing assessment efforts and extend the “culture of assessment” to all UWC courses, regardless of the means used to deliver those courses to students.

Assessment in Student Services
By Nora McGuire

The Offices of Student Services have decided to target new student orientation as the initial focus of their assessment activities. However, “Rather than conceiving of orientation as a single event or program, UW Colleges Student Services defines the orientation of new students to the university to be a process that begins with the student’s initial contact with the university and continues through the first semester of enrollment.” The core objectives for orientation throughout the UW Colleges include the following.

1. To familiarize new students with the physical resources and facilities of the campus, as well as the related policies and regulations governing their safe and secure use.
2. To enhance student understanding of the purposes and nature of the university in general and the nature and mission of the UW Colleges in particular.
3. To provide students with serviceable information about academic policies, procedures, requirements, and programs sufficient to enable students to make informed choices about their academic careers.
4. To inform students of their formal responsibilities regarding the university and their vital role as partners in their university experience.
5. To acquaint students with the array of valuable support services, co-curricular opportunities, self assessment resources, and auxiliary programs readily available to them.
6. To create opportunities for new students to meet and interact with the faculty, staff and other students in both structured and unstructured contexts.

7. To provide relevant information and assurance to the primary support groups of new students, both in the recruitment and transitional phase of our relationship with the new student.

An orientation survey that measures whether students mastered certain information included in orientation sessions has been developed and is being piloted at two campuses this semester. This online survey will be administered at all campuses during the upcoming fall semester.

Focus groups will be conducted at selected campuses in the spring of next year to obtain further information about students' experiences during their first year of enrollment. Analysis of both the survey data and the focus group responses will be completed in the spring of 2006, at which time the full report of the Student Services Assessment Subcommittee will be distributed. The results of the assessment will be used by campuses to improve orientation programs for students.

Assessing Needs: A Critical Component in Good Grant Writing ***By Eric Smith***

When it comes to developing a successful grant proposal, the assessment process is a critical component. To more fully understand how assessment relates to successful grant writing, we need to think about the grant writing process from the viewpoint of the organization or person who is providing the funding. One of the first questions that a funder will ask is, "Is this project based on a real set of needs?" The funder wants to know that a project is meeting real needs, not just a set of program activities that may or may not relate to what is truly important. Grant proposals that have little basis in reality or do not document the needs of those it is going to serve, are usually rejected.

How do you assess needs? Assessing the needs of those you plan to serve varies quite a bit depending on the scope of the project. An effective assessment might be a brief questionnaire that you might put together yourself. Other assessments make good use of surveys or questionnaires that have been conducted by other organizations. A good example of using someone else's data might be the annual survey conducted by the Wisconsin Council on Children, Youth and Families. Each year this organization publishes a county-by-county assessment on the status of Wisconsin's children. This resource document provides a rich source of data on families and children. For research-related projects, the assessment design may need to be more sophisticated and based on a more rigorous scientific methodology. Above all else, the critical factor is for you to use an assessment process that "proves your case" to a potential funder. Here are some tips on assessments and grant writing.

- ∞ Read grant guidelines carefully. These guidelines will usually tell you the scope and sophistication that is needed for your assessment.
- ∞ Explore past grants that have been funded by the organization. These grant summaries will usually tell you about the assessment process that was used.
- ∞ If you are uncertain about the type or scope of assessment required, contact a person from the funding agency and ask.

By following these tips, you will be able to develop a successful grant proposal with a strong assessment component.

Assessing Aesthetic Skills
By Gregg Nettesheim

Beginning this fall some faculty and instructional academic staff will begin assessing aesthetic skills, the fourth proficiency identified as central to our general education program. The two performance indicators being used to measure proficiency in aesthetic skills are: 1. “Engage with and critically reflect on a work of creative expression,” and 2. “Discuss their engagement with and critical reflection on a work of creative expression.” During the 2005-2006 academic year, department assessment committees will choose between returning to an assessment of analytical skills with its 6 performance indicators, beginning to assess the new aesthetic skills proficiency, or assessing both of these proficiencies.

Our review of assessment practices has shown that very few colleges and universities attempt to assess aesthetic skills or aesthetic engagement. This is in contrast to the near universal assessment of analytical skills. The small number of schools attempting to assess aesthetic skills may be a reflection of the difficulty in describing the skill itself and in writing rubrics for measuring proficiency in that skill. Regardless of the difficulty, it was decided that mastery of skills of aesthetic engagement is an essential part of a program of general education in the UW Colleges.

At a joint meeting later this month, the senate assessment committee, department assessment coordinators, and campus assessment coordinators will begin to discuss matching performance indicators to courses for the fall 2005 assessment cycle. It is our hope that a number of departments will choose to assess aesthetic skills in one or more courses this fall.



Have a Great Summer!