

Anthropology Major, WASC, Student Learning Outcomes Project
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STEP 1: DEVELOPING LEARNING OUTCOMES

The first step in our project was to develop formal student learning outcomes for the anthropology major that could then be publicized and eventually assessed. Through on line research, I gathered and read through reams of information on learning outcomes and assessment, focusing in particular on what other anthropology programs around the country have identified as learning outcomes for the major. I then reviewed our department's requirements for majors, courses offered, catalogue copy, website, and a sample of syllabi to get a sense of the learning outcomes implicit in the subject matter of our courses and the way our major is structured. On the basis of those two bodies of data, I drafted a long list of possible learning outcomes to serve as the basis for departmental discussion.

STEP 2: PUBLICIZING LEARNING OUTCOMES

The Anthropology Department agreed upon the following three outcomes as the core achievements of our majors.

1. AWARENESS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND GLOBAL RELATIONSHIPS
2. RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL SKILLS (ethnographic methods)
3. COMMUNICATION SKILLS (able to organize information and present ideas)

We added new sections to our catalogue copy and to our department's website that articulate and explain these outcomes.

STEPS 3: GATHERING DATA ON/FROM OUR MAJORS

We discussed as a department what we would like to know about our majors. We decided it would be important to try to get a wholistic picture from majors themselves as to what in particular they value about the major, and what skills and knowledge from the major they think will remain useful and important to them after graduating. I am designing questions for an open-ended sample survey of some of our best graduating seniors (to be administered soon to about 20 of them). We hope to use the information gathered to review and refine our learning outcomes, and as a comparison with other information we will gather on our majors.

FURTHER STEPS:

Relationship of core curriculum and Learning Outcomes

In general terms, our Intro course and our area courses contribute primarily to outcome #1. Our research courses 30A and 30B contribute heavily to outcome #2, and our Majors Seminar [which is an elective] continues to develop all three, but with particular attention to #2 and #3. We have begun discussions about creating more of a capstone experience for our majors, perhaps using the Major's Seminar and making it a required course. We will continue to weigh that and other options in the next academic year.

Determining Student Achievement of learning outcomes

We have begun the process of exploring what would be appropriate means and measures of assessing learning outcomes for our major. Our faculty feel strongly that any assessment should not require additional activities on the part of our majors but should be

based upon the course work that students produce in the process of pursuing our major. As a faculty we already work closely with our majors, so we have never felt a need for this kind of additional assessment. The e-portfolio concept where students can upload and store their work for later assessment would appear to be an excellent solution that would offer something to students as well as serve our purposes. At this time, however, we do not have any information about the possibility of setting up e-portfolios for our majors. We will begin by surveying majors, and will work on developing a more objective means of assessment.

Challenges of using Assessment to improve teaching and learning in anthropology

Teaching and learning in anthropology courses are currently assessed in a number of ways including all of the student work we supervise and grade, and the student feedback we receive about teachers and courses, both formally in student evaluations and informally in communication with students and alums. It is therefore not self-evident to our faculty members that assessing student learning outcomes in the manner required by the accreditation exercise can uncover anything new. However, we are always looking for ways to attract more majors and to strengthen the intellectual achievements of our majors. We will use the information from assessment along with the other information to consider whether any changes in the organization of our major, required courses, and elective offerings are warranted. We are already aware that our students develop greater mastery of skills and knowledge in smaller classes and seminars. Students who produce honor's theses over the course of an academic year working closely with a faculty mentor gain significantly in their mastery of knowledge and skills, and from the mentorship experience. Other students would surely benefit from some form of this experience. However, to institute curricular changes along these lines, to make our huge Intro courses and other large courses smaller, and/or to make our writing intensive Majors Seminar a requirement for all our students, would require additional resources.

I fear that the assessment exercise will simply become another bureaucratic routine devoid of real intellectual content and therefore attracting little engagement on the part of faculty. Or perhaps that is what it is supposed to be, like balancing one's checkbook or something.