Guidelines for Reviewing Assessment Reports

Beginning in 2011, departments with undergraduate majors are expected to report on their assessment activities. By assessment, we mean a systematic and ongoing process of identifying student learning outcomes, assessing student performance in relation to these outcomes, and using the results to improve student learning and academic programs. This process includes four basic steps:

1. Articulate outcomes for student learning;
2. Gather evidence about how well students are achieving the outcomes;
3. Evaluate the evidence and interpret the findings; and
4. Use the findings for programmatic and curricular improvements.

These four steps are typically thought of as a cycle with one step leading to the next, creating a process for continuously improving student learning:

Although assessment is required for institutional accreditation, it can also be a powerful tool for improving academic programs and curricula. Therefore, assessment reports should describe how the assessment process was conducted *by* and, most importantly, *for* the department. Assessment reports need not be large, elaborate, or require much extra work. In fact, we encourage departments to report on small-scale projects (e.g., ones focusing on a single learning outcome drawing student work from a single course or series of courses) that, if possible, reach findings through the collection of samples of student work already being assigned. No matter the scale, departments should develop an assessment process that is meaningful, manageable, and sustainable (Allen, 2004). That is, assessment reports should address issues that are meaningful to faculty involved in the major, should be built on assessment methods already in place and integrated into existing faculty work, and should be frequently discussed at regular faculty meetings.

As defined at UCI, assessment reports should address the following areas:

1. Evidence review process: What assessment evidence was collected, which faculty reviewed it and when, and how did they evaluate the student work?

2. Findings: Are the findings reported in ways consistent with the needs, style, and culture of the department and have appropriate standards for student performance been established?

3. Use of findings: Is there a clear understanding of the department's purpose in doing assessment, who will use the findings, and the program areas that the findings will inform?

The following sections describe our expectations around these three areas.

1. Evidence Review Process

A description of the assessment evidence review process should include the type of assessment evidence collected, which faculty reviewed the evidence, and when and how they evaluated the student work. In their 2009-10 assessment plans, UCI departments identified a variety of methods used to collect student work, such as capstone projects, course assignments/papers, tests and exams, presentations and performances, and portfolios. Quantitative and qualitative methods to collect student work are equally valid, as is either collecting samples of student work or using work from all students in the program. In addition to collecting direct evidence of student learning, some departments also collect indirect evidence using surveys, individual and group interviews, and course evaluations. No matter the method used to gather evidence, it should be reviewed by faculty who are core members of or affiliated with the department that offers the undergraduate major. This review process should be a collaborative one, involving departmental students and/or staff as long as primacy continues to be placed on the involvement of faculty.

The description should include how the student work was evaluated. This involves two steps: specifying key criteria that are the focus of the evaluation (e.g., oral communication delivery technique) and defining levels of performance (e.g., "below", "meets", and "exceeds" expectations). Typically, taking these two steps takes the form of a scoring guide or grading rubric. Programs are strongly encouraged to develop such instruments for evaluating student work as a means of ensuring their conclusions are reasonably accurate and documenting how they arrived at their decisions.

Descriptions of the assessment evidence review process should address the following questions:
- What methods were used to collect student work? Are these methods that directly capture evidence of student learning? Were supplemental indirect methods used?
- Who was involved in the evidence review process? To what extent were appropriate faculty involved? Who in the department led the process? When did the review of student work occur? Are there plans for the review process to take place at a certain time during each year or as part of regular faculty activities?
- How was the student work evaluated? Was there agreement on the criteria and the levels of performance used? Were particular evaluative tools, such as scoring guides, rubrics or checklists, used? If the evaluation was less structured, how did faculty ensure being reasonably accurate in arriving at their conclusions?

2. Findings

Departments are expected to report findings in ways consistent with the needs, style, and culture of the department and those reviewing the reports are expected to respect disciplinary and methodological differences (Carpenter & Bach, 2010). Some departments will take a qualitative approach and others a quantitative approach; some will use tables with percentages and averages and others will use narratives with categorical listings and thematic analysis. Again, both approaches (or a mix of them) are equally valid. Departments also have discretion

in how they define the significance of their findings. Departments that prefer to present statistical tests for significance are invited to do so just as departments that approach "significance," along with issues of validity and reliability, differently are invited to use their own disciplinary-based definitions. Similarly, if a department has collected direct and indirect student learning evidence, it is welcome to approach and incorporate the supplemental indirect evidence as it sees fit.

However, all departments are expected to establish a standard for student performance. Considering that a standard (or "target") for student performance can lead to better articulation of student achievement and that findings are more meaningful and useful if compared against a standard (Suskie, 2009), departments should focus on setting a standard for students' collective performance. Examples of standards are "90% of our students should surpass minimal performance levels," "a third of our students should fall into the 'exceeds expectations' category for outcome #3," or "all of our students should be able to interpret basic descriptive statistics." For many programs, the standard will derive from the selected learning outcome or set of outcomes used during the current assessment cycle. Faculty involved in the major are expected to be involved in the standard-setting process, just as faculty should be involved in the analysis of findings and their implications. The standard should be related to findings in the report and connected to their use.

Discussion of findings should address the following questions:
- Are findings reported in a summary form that is sensible to a larger audience? Has the summary anonymized student work?
- Have the findings been presented in ways consistent with the needs, style, and culture of the department? Are the finding presented in ways that lead to decision-making discussions amongst faculty and staff?
- Has a standard(s) for student performance been established and employed in relation to the findings? Have the faculty involved been involved in the standard-setting process and in the discussion of how well students have met the standard?

3. Use of Findings

Assessment should not be undertaken without a clear understanding of a department's purpose in doing assessment, who will use the findings, and the decisions that the findings will inform (Suskie, 2009). As departments develop an explicit understanding of their purpose in doing assessment, they should bear in mind that, generally, assessment is done either for reasons of internal improvement or external accountability (Ewell, 2009). An improvement-oriented purpose leads to improvements in the quality of teaching, learning, programs, and services. An accountability-oriented purpose leads to the validation of current programs and services, usually by an accrediting group. An improvement purpose leads to reports for internal audiences, such as program faculty and staff and campus leadership whereas an accountability purpose leads to the identification of external audiences, such as accreditation representatives, who will use the findings. Use of findings, then, is shaped by your audiences' perspectives, needs, and priorities (Suskie, 2009).

Departments are expected to consider the benefits of doing assessment for the purpose of program improvement and for program faculty and staff to be the primary users of assessment findings. By focusing on questions pertinent to program faculty and staff, programs can reach decisions that are important to them, rather than to external groups. Moreover, by focusing on these types of questions—such as, Are my students learning the most important things I want

them to learn?, If they're not learning some important things, what are the stumbling points?, and Are there new pedagogies or technologies that might lead to improved student learning?— programs will be better able to engage faculty and staff with a stake in decisions stemming from the results (Suskie, 2009).

It is therefore expected that faculty will routinely and collectively discuss results and meaningful changes and that improvements will be implemented in the interest of bettering student learning. In discussing results and improvements, areas of improvement should be specified. Some programs will specify curricular matters, such as the alignment of curricular design with the program's learning outcomes or the identification of superfluous and/or missing curricular pieces (Miller & Leskes, 2005). Other programs will specify instructional issues, such as how well instruction taken as a whole enables students to achieve high levels of performance. And other programs will specify program and/or departmental operations and policy, discerning how well these elements foster cumulative learning of the outcomes. These selected areas should point to the program's next assessment cycle, indicating the focus of the process in the immediate future.

Discussion of use of findings should address the following questions:
- Is it clear that the department has considered assessment for the sake of improving its program and for program faculty and staff to be the primary users of assessment findings?
- Has the department "closed the loop"? What meaningful actions—in what specific areas—are being taken to improve the program and further promote learning based on the findings?
- Has the process involved faculty and staff in reviewing and using findings? Has the process involved those in the department who can take improvement-oriented action? Who will monitor the implementation of changes?

References

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Questions for Reviewing Assessment Reports

Evidence Review Process

- What methods were used to collect student work? Are these methods that directly capture evidence of student learning? Were supplemental indirect methods used?
- Who was involved in the evidence review process? To what extent were appropriate faculty involved? Who in the department led the process? When did the review of student work occur? Are there plans for the review process to take place at a certain time during each year or as part of regular faculty activities?
- How was the student work evaluated? Was there agreement on the criteria and the levels of performance used? Were particular evaluative tools, such as scoring guides, rubrics or checklists, used? If the evaluation was less structured, how did faculty ensure being reasonably accurate in arriving at their decisions?

Findings

- Are findings reported in a summary form that is sensible to a larger audience? Has the summary anonymized student work?
- Have the findings been presented in ways consistent with the needs, style, and culture of the department? Are the finding presented in ways that lead to decision-making discussions amongst faculty and staff?
- Has a standard(s) for student performance been established and employed in relation to the findings? Have the faculty involved been involved in the standard-setting process and in the discussion of how well students have met the standard?

Use of Findings

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- Has the department "closed the loop"? What meaningful actions—in what specific areas— are being taken to improve the program and further promote learning based on the findings?
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