Creating a Culture of Assessment at NIU

What is a culture of assessment? Why is it needed? According to Carolinda Douglass, Director of the Office of Assessment Services (OAS), “A solid, positive culture of assessment is needed to help NIU address increasing demands in the way student learning is documented and measured.” Dr. Stephen Zerwas, Director of the Office of Academic Assessment at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, says that “there are valid demands from external agencies to account for what we are doing in higher education.” As educators, we should be able to provide evidence to parents, employers, legislators, and accrediting agencies that we know both what students should be learning and how well they are learning it (Paradis, 2005). With the help of faculty and staff, OAS is attempting to meet these demands at NIU by raising assessment awareness and fostering a positive culture of assessment on campus.

According to Suskie (2005), a positive culture of assessment is one in which:

- Institutional leaders understand and value assessment
- There is adequate support for assessment needs
- Assessment efforts are encouraged, recognized, and rewarded and
- Efforts to improve teaching are honored and valued

There is a shared understanding among assessment professionals that “the development of a culture of assessment must be approached both from the top down in terms of institutional expectations, leadership, and resources;
**Assessment FAQ**

**What does the University Assessment Panel do?**

The University Assessment Panel (UAP) was created in fall 1998 to provide oversight for assessment activities within the Division of Academic and Student Affairs. The UAP’s specific responsibilities include reviewing the University Mission Statement, the Illinois Board of Higher Education focus statement for Northern Illinois University, and the goals of the Illinois Commitment as a context for assessment; coordinating assessment activities at the undergraduate and graduate levels and in academic support units; promoting campus-wide assessment activities to improve learning; supporting departments in preparing the assessment component of discipline-specific accreditation reviews; helping position the university for the next Higher Learning Commission reaccreditation process; and reviewing departmental assessment activities in conjunction with program review.

When the UAP reviews departmental assessment plans, it uses a rubric to determine whether elements of those plans are exemplary, established, developing, or undeveloped. Elements being evaluated include the plan’s outcomes, methods, overall plan, data, analysis, and response.

The UAP recently reviewed the assessment plan for the baccalaureate of philosophy, and found its outcomes to be written in an exemplary manner. They are presented here as an example of what well-written outcomes look like.

Questions about the UAP may be directed to Carolinda Douglass at CDoug@niu.edu or 753-8659.

The Department of Philosophy’s stated learning outcomes, below, earned an “exemplary” rating from the University Assessment Panel (UAP). According to the UAP’s evaluation rubric, “exemplary” means “All outcomes are clearly stated in measurable terms; all are student learning focused and outcomes oriented; the number of outcomes is appropriate and all outcomes reflect higher levels of achievement.”

---

**Philosophy B.A.: Objective Measures of Student Learning**

**Analytical Essay Writing**
1. clearly presents philosophical theories and arguments
2. supports a philosophical thesis with strong arguments
3. critically evaluates opposing theories and arguments

**Knowledge of Major Ethical Theories**
1. comparatively describes competing ethical theories
2a. knowledge of Plato and Aristotle
2b. knowledge of Hellenistic philosophers
2c. knowledge of Kant
2d. knowledge of utilitarianism
2e. knowledge of moral epistemology

**History of Philosophy**
1. ability to compare / contrast distinct philosophical systems
2. knowledge of major figures / movements in ancient Greek philosophy
3. knowledge of major figures / movements in early modern philosophy

**Metaphysics and Epistemology**
1. ability to describe and compare competing theories
2. knowledge of principal theories and problems

**Logic**
1. knowledge of fundamental concepts
2. use of truth tables
3. English-symbolism translation
4. constructing proofs/interpretations
UOTC Outcomes: Closing the Feedback Loop

The Campus Assessment Network recently enjoyed a presentation from Carrie Zack, Assessment Coordinator of the University Office for Teacher Certification (UOTC), regarding aggregated 2003-2005 outcomes of the UOTC’s Exit Survey. The survey collects feedback from student teachers, their cooperating teachers, and their NIU supervisors regarding student teachers’ preparation to meet the Illinois Teaching and Learning Standards.

It is critical to note that, after analyzing ratings on each item, teacher certification programs utilized the findings. The survey outcomes prompted programs to institute improvements such as the following:

- Chemistry implemented SharePoint as a portfolio/team site to focus on areas of weakness
- English added more emphasis on management and discipline
- Foreign Languages devoted more time to lesson planning
- History/Social Sciences planned to bring in experts and recommend courses to students related to areas of weakness
- Math developed new learning activities in the areas of technology and working with diverse students
- Music redesigned its handbook
- Physics investigated developing an interdisciplinary course on reading with the Department of Literacy Education
- The Exit Survey helps meet the requirements of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Preparedness is ranked on 5 point scale (5 = “very well” and 1 = “not at all”).

Over the course of the three-year period, the following items were consistently rated highest:

- maintain standards of professionalism (4.55)
- work effectively with diverse students (4.33)
- use an appropriate variety of oral, written, and visual communication in his/her teaching (4.31)

Items consistently earning the lowest ratings included:

- use reading improvement strategies to enhance student learning in the discipline (3.78)
- use effective forms of assessment (3.89)
- integrate current technology effectively and appropriately into instructional methods (3.98)

No items averaged less than “adequate” rating over 3 years (lowest = 3.78 and highest = 4.55). Finally, no survey item had an average rating below “adequately prepared.”

Your Contribution is Welcome

What assessment methods have worked well for you? What findings have helped you modify your program? Toolkit would love to print your assessment tips or success story! We’re looking to share the wisdom that we each develop at home, making the work of assessment more productive. If you’d like material to be considered for inclusion in a future edition of Toolkit, submit a Word document of no more than 300 words as an email attachment to cdoug@niu.edu.
Amy Franklin is the Director of Assessment and Training for the Division of Student Affairs at NIU. One of her primary functions is to assist departments within the Division with their various assessment activities. In particular, she conducts trainings on identifying and assessing student learning outcomes and benchmarking; reviews assessment instruments and procedures and offers feedback; and provides resources to departments for their specific assessment projects.

Amy Franklin

A member of the University Assessment Panel, Ms. Franklin began her work in assessment in Student Affairs while working as a Health Educator in Health Enhancement. In that role, she assisted departmental efforts to collect data about student health behaviors that were used to direct and assess programs and services.

Amy indicates that a pleasant part of her job is helping staff identify the student learning that is occurring in students’ various activities outside the classroom. She says, “Student learning is central to the mission of Student Affairs, and each day that I can participate in supporting student success is a great day!”

Click either picture, below, to watch the video interview.

Student Affairs at NASPA Assessment and Retention Conference

Four staff members (F. Michelle Bringas, James Brunson, Amy Franklin, and Brandi Hephner LaBanc) will represent the NIU Division of Student Affairs at NASPA in St. Louis this June. The NASPA 2007 International Assessment and Retention Conference is entitled “A Shared Enterprise: Assessment as a Cross-Campus Strategy for Improving Student Learning and Retention.”

Dr. James Brunson, Assistant Vice-President of Diversity & Equity, and F. Michelle Bringas, Director of the Asian American Center, will present “Improving Learning & Retention through a Diversity & Equity Community of Practice.” A Diversity & Equity Community of Practice takes responsibility to formulate, implement, and assess joint annual goals to enhance the learning culture at Northern Illinois University. This presentation will present strategies to enhance the learning culture on campus; share tools that are currently being utilized to assess the outcomes of the programs; and demonstrate the collaboration of university partners to enhance cross-institutional responsibility to improve learning and retention.

In addition, Ms. Bringas will present “Developing Assessment Tools for an Asian American Peer Mentor Program.” Her talk will cover the assessment tools that were developed to measure the student learning outcomes of the program.
The Problem-Solving Analysis Protocol (P-SAP) Rubric

The previous issue of Toolkit featured the first two tables of the Problem-Solving Analysis Protocol (P-SAP), which is a written problem-solving protocol and rubric for assessing problem solving skills that can be easily integrated into the normal activities of a class. Created by Drs. Pamela Steinke of North Carolina State University and Peggy Fitch of Central College, the tool is based on the work of researchers in service-learning on cognitive outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1999) and the reflective judgment framework of intellectual development (King & Kitchener, 1994).

The P-SAP rubric provides scoring criteria for two dimensions (locus/source and complexity) for each of the four questions in the protocol (questions about problem, cause, solution and analysis of solution). The previous issue of Toolkit provided the Problem Analysis Locus and Problem Analysis Complexity rubrics. Readers are now invited to examine the rubrics for Causal Locus (online) and Causal Complexity (below).

The problem-solving protocol presents a real-world issue to the student that is directly relevant to the application of material the student is learning in the course, and by simply changing the issue the protocol can be used in a wide variety of classes. Students answer a series of questions about the causes, consequences and solutions for a problem that arises from the issue. The problem-solving protocol can be used in class as a graded assignment or exam question or as a class exercise to start discussion.

The P-SAP has been tested at several institutions in Iowa, Michigan and Illinois and the rubric has demonstrated high inter-rater reliability (.75-.94 range) and good construct validity with intellectual development and cognitive learning measures.

References Coding Tips

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causal Complexity (2nd question)</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no cause given; does not think there is a cause; response does not identify a cause; gives a response that does not answer the question about cause</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., “don’t know”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“People would rather do things their own way, not be told how to do them.”; “Everyone is different.”; “If they can’t do a certain activity then they get frustrated and don’t want to try anymore.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“People not caring could be a major factor. I also think that all the temptations of bad eating is in there too. Some of it is just in the family.”; “There is such a fine line between what a student should be able to do and what not. Many parents allow children to do things at home that they aren’t supposed to do at school.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High: at least two causes identified and explained with causal connections within at least one of the explanations; causes representing multiple perspectives integrated with causal links</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Upcoming Events

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Conference:
A Shared Enterprise: Assessment as a Cross-Campus Strategy for Improving Student Learning & Retention

This joint meeting will offer general interest sessions, round tables, sponsored sessions, and pre-meeting sessions.

The 2007 Assessment Institute

The purpose of this series of educational programs is to further the scholarship and practice of assessment in higher education. Presenters and participants come from institutions across the country. Many of these faculty and administrators are responsible for large assessment programs on their campuses and nearly one-fifth are vice presidents, assistant/associate vice presidents, provosts, assistant/associate provosts, deans or assistant/associate deans.

The institute is designed for the following faculty and staff audiences: Discipline Based, Multidisciplinary, Student Services, Institutional Research, Assessment Officers, Administrative Officers.

DID YOU KNOW?

Graduate Alumni Survey Results

The Office of Assessment Services conducted NIU’s Class of 2005 Graduate Degree Alumni Survey one year after the group’s graduation. Respondents felt positive about their education at NIU:

- 95 percent reported that they completed their degree in a reasonable amount of time
- 90 percent felt as though faculty were academically supportive and helpful to them
- 93 percent indicated that their degree program was a worthwhile investment of their time

Alumni were also pleased with how NIU prepared them for life after graduation:

- 91 percent of respondents indicated that they were currently employed of which…
- 90 percent reported being satisfied with their current job
- 96 percent felt as though their graduate degree prepared them for their job
- 93 percent of respondents reported that their graduate degree also prepared them for an additional degree
- Overall, survey respondents had good things to say about the university:
  - 91 percent indicated that the quality of their interactions with other students and faculty at NIU was good
  - 92 percent reported a positive attitude toward NIU and…
  - 92 percent said that they would recommend NIU to their friends and family.
Creating a Culture of Assessment at NIU

and from the bottom up through departments and program-level adoption, shared understandings and commitment” (Paradis, 2005, p. 7). A culture of assessment is a university-wide commitment to improve student learning. According to Dr. Zerwas, in order to get faculty and staff involved in the assessment process, institutions need to “build upon the strength of people who are conducting assessment and give them what they need to support their efforts.”

In addition to demonstrating the quality of learning that is taking place among programs, courses, and support units across the university, other benefits of assessment include improving student retention by enhancing their preparation for subsequent courses, improving student awareness and understanding of their own learning, and preparing them more effectively for life outside of academics (Paradis, 2005). According to Carrie Zack, Teacher Certification Assessment Coordinator in the University Office of Teacher Certification, “assessment helps us gauge how well we are preparing students for the roles we are preparing them to take on after graduation.”

It is our goal that the assessment process will eventually come to be viewed by all faculty and staff as one of validation, rather than compliance. Increased efforts in conducting assessment will be the product of faculty and staff not engaging in assessment because they have to, but because they want to. Likewise, as something that is appreciated and valued by all members of the university, assessment practices will be incorporated into the daily work activities of university employees as well (Lakos & Phipps, 2004). “It is now realized that the assessment movement is only gaining strength nationally and is being integrated into all levels of institutions…it is not the “fad” that would disappear as some believed” (Paradis, 2005, p. 9). Although transforming the culture of any organization takes time, it is our hope that faculty and staff will see the importance of adopting a culture of learning at NIU, and begin to incorporate assessment practices into their respective programs, courses, and support units across campus.

References


“Assessment helps us gauge how well we are preparing students for the roles we are preparing them to take on after graduation.”

--Carrie Zack,
Teacher Certification Assessment Coordinator