Expo Shows Culture of Assessment is Growing

On March 19, NIU’s third annual Assessment Expo did more than showcase ten great examples of assessment. “Almost every poster here describes how evidence from assessment practices improved programs,” said Dr. Virginia Cassidy, Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Development. “Since 1999, we’ve come a very long way.”

For example:
- Concerns raised about a lack of confidence were addressed by re-examining opportunities to gain hands-on experience in laboratories (Kinesiology).
- Tracking the number of web hits gave a good indication of the types of articles constituents are most interested in. Additional articles will be added to continue to enhance this section of the site (Campus Child Care).
- The Dance program’s assessment showed that students scored lower in their ability to perform or project in the classroom as a necessary quality of a performer. The faculty plan to incorporate workshops dedicated to the transition of technical dance skills to the art of performance.

In a nod to the Baccalareate Review, this year’s Expo covered the themes of Critical Thinking, Communication, Context, and Creativity. After the general poster session, round tables were arranged so that participants could rotate to discuss each topic.

Each person attending Expo 2010 received a 2 Gb portable drive preloaded with all of the posters, plus the campus assessment message. For those who missed the Expo, the posters are online at the OAS website; once there, click the red lettering of the posters you wish to see.
What are the Annual Updates’ criteria? How can common mistakes be avoided?

FAQ: The request for Annual Assessment Updates has just been sent out for 2009-2010 and the Office of Assessment Services (OAS) has begun to hear a familiar set of questions: What are the criteria for completing the Annual Updates? How can my program best meet these criteria and avoid making common mistakes?

What are the criteria for completing the Annual Updates? There are a total of 15 criteria that are reviewed when Annual Updates are submitted. Shown in the boxes below, these criteria are divided across four sections: Methods, Student Learning Outcomes, Evidence, and Use of Results.

Methods
1) Two distinct assessment methods are listed
2) All assessment methods discussed in “Evidence” are listed in “Methods”
3) Methods are relevant to the Learning Outcomes
4) Methods are clearly defined
5) Methods listed are appropriate means of assessment
6) Surveys, rubrics, and/or other assessment tools are included as appropriate

Student Learning Outcomes
1) Learning Outcomes are clearly stated
2) Learning Outcomes are measurable
3) Learning Outcomes include a numeric target for success

Evidence
1) A summary of the data from each assessment method is provided
2) Data provided are relevant to the assessment method
3) Data provided are stated in measurable terms as defined by “Learning Outcomes”

Use of Results
1) Results used are relevant to findings mentioned in “Evidence”
2) Results used are in an effort to improve/maintain the program as indicated by assessment
3) Results used are relevant to student learning outcomes

How can my program best meet these criteria and avoid making common mistakes? A review of the most recent Annual Assessment Update Results indicates two key problem areas in the Annual Updates. First, although most programs do well (either meet or partially meet) in relation to the first five criteria under Methods, criterion 6 is unmet by many programs. This criterion is simply to attach surveys, rubrics and other assessment tools to the Annual Update submission. This is a relatively easy fix for most programs that have the tools but don’t always include them. For those programs that need to develop tools, this is more problematic but not insurmountable as the OAS is always on hand to help faculty and staff to find resources to assist them in this process.

The second problem area comes in relation to criterion 3 under Student Learning Outcomes: including a numeric target for success. While programs across the campus have improved substantially in stating student learning outcomes, targets still need to be set for many of these outcomes. This can be as simple as stating the number/percentage of students expected to achieve a specific level of success each year. Writing numeric targets for outcomes can be a challenging process, but reasonable targets for student success can and should be set to assist in measuring progress in relation to expectations. Again, the OAS can assist your program in this endeavor. Just drop us a line or give us a call!

Most common problems
TOOL OF THE MONTH

Political Science Develops Outstanding Paper Award Rubric

The featured tool this month comes from the Expo poster submitted by the Department of Political Science.

BACKGROUND

Each spring, the Political Science Department chooses an “Outstanding Undergraduate Paper” written during the previous academic year. Although students may nominate themselves, professors are encouraged to submit their best papers from upper-division classes. A three-person committee comprised of members of the Department’s Undergraduate Committee chooses the winner. The recipient is then recognized at the Department’s May graduation ceremony.

THE PROBLEM

In the past, determining the recipient has been somewhat subjective. Committee members were not always given clear guidelines regarding the criteria for which papers should be evaluated. Second, the department had no systematic evidence of the quality of submissions and could not easily examine whether it was achieving its learning outcomes through the paper competition.

THE SOLUTION

The department’s Undergraduate Committee created a rubric, which allows for a systematic evaluation of paper competition submissions and an assessment of whether the department is achieving its learning outcomes. One of the Political Science Department’s learning outcomes for its undergraduate curriculum is “Students will have the ability to think critically and to construct logical arguments concerning institutions and processes of government and contemporary public policy issues.” A part of this rubric is devoted to evaluating this outcome.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTSTANDING PAPER AWARD RUBRIC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student has done a great deal of research, using many different sources that cover all relevant issues on the topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Critical &amp; Analytic Thinking</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovative and original thesis that is clearly stated and logically sustained throughout the paper at a very high level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper is well-organized, and paragraphs follow each other in an orderly progression.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Writing Quality</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Excellent and clear academic prose, and excellent grasp of the rules of sentence structure, grammar and punctuation.</td>
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“Assurance of Learning” Leads to “A-Team”

In January 2010 the College of Business formed a team to focus on Assurance of Learning, assessment and accreditation. The team is led by Associate Dean Beth Towell with assistance from staff coordinator, Amy Buhrow, and faculty coordinator, Bob Beatty.

The team recently granted an interview to Toolkit. They described the Assurance of Learning initiative as designed to ensure that students are learning what they should, and when they are not, to provide the information needed to make data driven course and program improvements. These improvements target the development of well-prepared, employable graduates, as well as continuous Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation. Of the AACSB’s 21 standards, seven deal with Assurance of Learning.

The process is carried out on a regular basis in the following cyclical manner:

1. Identify or refine learning goals and objectives.
2. Align the curriculum with goals.
3. Identify instruments that directly measure student learning.
4. Collect, analyze and disseminate assessment data.
5. Use assessment data for continuous improvement.

Beth emphasized that faculty are the true drivers of the Assurance of Learning process. Faculty are responsible for articulating what the students in their classes as well as all College of Business students should know and be able to do; they are responsible for the curriculum; they measure student learning in the courses they teach; and they analyze the data and make changes to their courses and the college programs. Their involvement and ownership of the process is key to maintaining a system that yields actionable data to improve student learning.

When asked how students are affected, Amy explained that the College of Business has three core values. The first is “We believe the learner is the beneficiary of all of our activities.” The Assurance of Learning process operationalizes this core value.

“It provides a mechanism for the college to articulate what we expect our students to learn, how they are going to learn it, and if they don’t, it helps start meaningful dialogue to get us back on track. We do it to ensure our graduates are the best and the brightest and their degrees are valuable in the marketplace.”

Bob provided an example of assessment data and how it will be used to adjust the curriculum.

“We have been collecting and analyzing data on our juniors’ spreadsheet skills for three years. The results have consistently fallen below the target. In an effort to improve these junior-level skills, and provide a base for success in using spreadsheets to solve business problems across the curriculum, the college will require all incoming fall 2010 freshman to complete an introductory business information systems course. The success of this program change will be measured to ensure its effectiveness.”

How did this group come to be called the A-Team?

“Early on the team recognized the need for deep faculty participation but their hesitation to get involved,” said Beth. “Since the team is focusing on so many “A’s” we decided a shorter, more fun name might appeal to more faculty members and be less daunting. The A-Team meets every other Tuesday for an hour to discuss Assurance of Learning, assessment and accreditation issues. So far, each meeting has brought in more faculty.”

Toolkit thanks the A-Team for the interview, as well as its contributions to the education of NIU’s students. Amy also generously agreed to a video interview, shown below.

Your Input 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 we each develop, 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.
DID YOU KNOW?

Class of 2008 Alumni

Give NIU Favorable Reviews

Those who earned graduate degrees in 2008 had good things to say about their education at NIU. One year after graduation, according to alumni surveys:

- 95 percent reported that faculty at NIU were thorough in their treatment of course material
- 94 percent felt as though faculty were academically supportive and helpful to them
- 97 percent reported that they completed their degree in a reasonable amount of time
- 88 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:
  - 95 percent reported being satisfied with their current job
  - 90 percent felt as though their graduate degree prepared them for their job

Overall, survey respondents had good things to say about the university:

- 85 percent indicated that the quality of their interactions with faculty at NIU was good
- 94 percent reported a positive attitude toward NIU and…
- 93 percent said that they would recommend NIU to their friends and family.

Assessment Video:

Amy Buhrow, College of Business

Amy Buhrow joined NIU in 2003 and the College of Business in 2005. She currently serves as the assessment/AACSB coordinator. In this role she is responsible for coordinating the Assurance of Learning process and assessment activities for the college. She is also responsible for marketing the NIU Rockford Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degree completion program in the Rockford community.

Amy brings a wealth of education and marketing experience and expertise gained from previous roles with the College of Business Experiential Learning Center, NIU Outreach, and more. She holds a Master of Science in Education from NIU and a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture Education from Illinois State University.

Click either image, left, for a three-minute video of Amy discussing assessment.
NIU Paints Self-Portrait

Along with over 300 other colleges and universities, Northern Illinois University has now engaged in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) by posting its College Portrait.

The VSA’s website spells out “an initiative by public four-year universities to supply basic, comparable information on the undergraduate student experience to important constituencies through a common web report — the College Portrait.

“The VSA was developed in 2007 by a committed group of university leaders and is sponsored by two higher education associations — the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU).”

In addition, “Information includes student and campus characteristics, cost of attendance, success and progress rates, campus safety, class size, student experiences on campus, and student learning outcomes.” This means that parents and students can compare schools in an “apples to apples” kind of way.

Toolkit will continue to cover NIU’s compliance with this initiative. Every issue will explore one or more particular aspects of the University’s College Portrait. Click anywhere on the graphic to visit the Portrait immediately.
Feedback for the University Writing Project and First Year Composition Assessment

Each year, the Office of Assessment Services (OAS) works with the Department of English to conduct two writing assessments: the University Writing Project (UWP) and First Year Composition Assessment (FYC). The projects’ reports are shared with all deans, associate deans, chairs, participating faculty, and other interested parties. The reports are also discussed at the Academic Planning Council, General Education Committee, and University Assessment Panel. Finally, the OAS conducts an online survey of faculty who participated in the UWP to seek input on improvements in the assessment process.

The OAS gleaned several suggestions for improvement, including:

• Create a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for both projects to address faculty and student questions regarding participation in the projects.
• Consider recruiting a mix of faculty members from multiple disciplines to participate on the writing team.
• Invite the team coordinator for the Department of English writing team to attend a University Assessment Panel meeting to discuss the writing team’s process for assessing student writing, the team’s inter-rater reliability, and the standardized rubric that is used in assessments. Carolinda Douglass, Director of Assessment Services, indicated, “This recommendation will be fulfilled when Ellen Franklin visits the UAP on April 16.”
• In consultation with the Department of English faculty and/or Writing Center staff, create a list of writing “Dos and Don’ts” to share with department chairs and to post on the OAS website.

The Office of Assessment Services genuinely appreciates feedback on these projects. Suggestions can be made at any time; simply email Carolinda Douglass or telephone 753-8659. The staff will be glad to hear from you.

Mark Your Calendar

The final University Assessment Panel meeting of the academic year is scheduled for April 16 from 10:00 a.m. to noon in Altgeld 203.

The next Campus Assessment Network meeting is slated for Friday, April 23, from 1:30 to 3:30 in Adams Hall B13; all interested parties are invited. At the most recent meeting, David Stone, Director of the Office of Sponsored Projects, discussed ways to secure funding for assessment research and scholarship. This discussion will continue at the April 23 meeting.

This network is an informal group of assessment professionals and other interested parties across the NIU campus that come together to:
1) Communicate and network with one another on assessment issues,
2) Share information and assessment tools with one another to increase effectiveness in our assessment practices and,
3) Develop a shared assessment culture and common messages of assessment to better engage and support the broader NIU community in their assessment needs.

The Higher Learning Commission annual meeting will take place at the Hyatt Regency Chicago April 9-13. Pre-registration closes on April 2, 2010. After April 2, registration must occur on-site.