Including Students in Student Assessment

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At Northern Illinois University (NIU), the first year in the history of a student organization has been designed specifically to bring students into the conversation about assessment and student learning. Early in 2011, the first meeting of the Student Advisory Council on Learning Outcomes (SACLO) was convened with the help of a faculty advisor. Concern about students' lack of involvement in the academic conversations about student learning led to the creation of this new organization. A group of fifteen to twenty members established itself as the forum to address concerns and educate members of the community about the importance of involving students in the discourse of assessment. While students predominate, the group also includes faculty, staff, and administrators.

The imputus for forming this group came from a routine question asked during meetings of our University Assessment Panel, a college-wide committee that offers feedback to academic and support programs at NIU regarding the assessment of student learning. Undergraduate and graduate student representatives serve as voting members and often ask questions during meetings. One persistent question they posed was: How are program learning objectives communicated to students? A surprising number of responses suggested either that they were not directly communicated to students or that they were communicated primarily through the syllabus.

The impression conveyed was that communication of student learning objectives to students themselves was receiving minor attention! Thus, one of the first goals for SACLO was to determine how student learning objectives are communicated to students and to evaluate the effectiveness of this communication.

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Our first project was to review and evaluate syllabi of sixty general education courses. Working with our faculty advisor and the general education coordinator, SACLO reviewed these syllabi with the objective of evaluating how they communicated information about general education courses to students. Members reviewed the documents separately according to these questions generated by the group:
- Is there identification of the course as a general education course?
- Are there identifiable student learning outcomes?
- Are the amounts of required reading and writing listed?
- What assessment tools are used in the course?
- How clear and understandable is the grading scale?
- What university policies are included?

The results were surprising—only 35 percent of the sixty syllabi identified the course as a part of the general education curriculum. Fewer stated either the general education or course learning objectives. Further, there was a wide discrepancy between the amount of reading and writing required in these courses and the course grading scale—if the syllabus contained one. Some listed an A as 100 to 90 percent, and others listed an A as 100 to 85 percent (or lower). The university policies included also differed; some listed several policies, while others listed none. We concluded that, at the very least, syllabi should contain reference to the Center for Access Ability Resources so that students would know where to ask for help, if needed. Another surprising result was the differences in tone in these syllabi. Some established a warm, inviting, friendly learning space conducive to student learning; others clearly did not.

As a result of this analysis, members of SACLO composed a letter to the vice provost overseeing general education and made these recommendations for syllabi:
- General education courses should be identified as such; and they should list general education and course-specific learning outcomes.
- The grading scale and assessment tools should be listed and explained.
- Assignments should be connected to specific learning objectives.
- The tone of syllabi should invite students to participate in creating a proactive learning culture.

Our point, one that many students stressed throughout the process, is that there should be no ambiguity when it comes to grading and student learning. Ambiguity increases confusion and creates anxiety because students spend so much time deciphering expectations that it can be difficult to concentrate on learning. Questions remain about the transferability and applicability of the skills and content to be gained through each course. In the end, the consensus of SACLO members...
was that student learning objectives and expectations should be clearer.

Two important points were gleaned from this review of general education syllabi. First, having an important project like this as an early goal helped organize and solidify our group. It gave us specific objectives and tasks for building community, and it helped bring other members of the institution into our conversations. Second, the process was collaborative, and it brought SACLO members closer together. When we addressed the tone of the syllabus and the tone of our letter, diverse opinions were presented. However, through our discussions, students, faculty, administrators, and staff worked together to resolve our disagreements. Student voices were never marginalized or suppressed. It was a collective dialogue involving engaged members of SACLO who drafted the letter. No one group dominated the conversation.

Now these suggestions are being discussed in the general education and undergraduate curriculum committees, and SACLO members have been active participants in conversations about how to shape and develop syllabi to communicate with students. We are also working with the student government association and other organizations to educate more students on these topics. Students, too, must understand what a syllabus should do and how it can affect their learning. Focus groups are being formed to gather information about students’ expectations of and reactions to general education goals and student learning objectives. Additionally, SACLO members have participated in seminars and training sessions hosted by the vice provost’s office about how to adapt the American Association of Colleges & University’s VALUE rubrics to meet NIU’s assessment needs.

A second, smaller project undertaken by SACLO in its first year was a critique of data on the first-year composition program. SACLO members reviewed reports from the Office of Assessment Services that indicated that NTU students face some common writing challenges. Stemming from this review, SACLO members worked with faculty and staff to initiate an institution-wide conversation about the successes and challenges related to student writing. Now we are discussing ways to help students improve their writing and developing ways to assess and evaluate writing. Suggestions include making changes in NIU’s standardized writing rubric, initiating a campus dialogue about what constitutes appropriate academic writing, and discussing how to address student writing challenges. Through SACLO, students' suggestions have been a vital part of this conversation.

SACLO is a proactive group. We help others understand the importance of assessment and how to establish a strong feedback loop. As a result of our work with general education and the first-year composition program, SACLO was asked to review and endorse a proposal to fund e-portfolios on campus. Because portfolios provide both formative and summative data, they can be used to evaluate student learning as well as program effectiveness, and they provide a holistic approach to education while giving students opportunities for critical reflection and evaluation. Further, portfolios stimulate longitudinal awareness about learning and development—classes are no longer taken in isolation; through portfolios, students comprehend the connections and applications of class material. Students strongly supported the holistic approach of portfolios, and SACLO was able to endorse this proposal for change.

In our effort to converse with other members of the campus community, we have worked with the Campus Assessment Network, a faculty-staff organization at NTU, to cosponsor book discussions that promote better understanding and use of assessment. Through these events, SACLO members have been proactive in creating a meeting point where ideas on assessment and learning can be shared and debated, and voices—including those of students—can be expressed and heard.

In our second year of SACLO, members have developed a series of student-led professional development seminars to create a recognition program for faculty, administrators, and staff. Members have developed a series of student-led professional development seminars to create a recognition program for faculty, administrators, and staff.

Participants in this program will receive a certificate and emblem signifying their knowledge and support of best practices in assessment as recognized by the students. We hope this will be helpful to students when selecting courses or identifying individuals who can answer assessment-related questions. The program will work in conjunction with the Office of Assessment Services and will consist of sessions that mirror the five stages of the feedback loop:

1. Developing goals and objectives
2. Gathering appropriate data about student learning through the use of various tools and strategies
3. Collecting and analyzing the data
4. Reflecting on the data to guide improvements in teaching and learning
5. Closing the loop by disseminating the results of the improvements

We are pleased with the progress and potential of SACLO; however, we know one of this organization’s biggest future challenges will be recruiting and retaining students. Since assessment and student learning objectives often seem esoteric to students, attracting student attention and subsequent involvement is a significant challenge. Thankfully, SACLO has received much support from our advisor and
Faculty Decisions Relative to the Team’s Recommendations

The team presented recommendations to the faculty, secured feedback and direction, and adjusted plans for the future accordingly.

The faculty decided to retain the existing passing score for the assessment but to increase the desired passing percentage for exit students to 88 percent. Faculty members accepted the amendments to the rubric and agreed to test it themselves. They liked the idea of early diagnosis and direction of students to the Writing Center, but a decision about automatic Writing Center referrals was delayed until results of assessment using the revised rubric could enable better estimates of the volume and timing of these referrals. Faculty members indicated that in future writing assessments, we should score only COB students. (A few non-COB students in the sample were taking the courses as an elective.)

Conclusions

The team set out to learn about students’ accomplishment as writers. This was the third attempt to assess a Baccalaureate Characteristic as defined by the Lewis faculty. As with the two prior attempts, the team developed standards and applied them against student papers using a rubric. As "Net Income," the bottom line in an income statement, represents an indicator of company performance, this assessment has provided an indicator of student performance. The assessment helped to identify and inform faculty of successes and shortcomings about student writing and allowed identification of next steps in the effort to improve student writing. This, coupled with the assessments of the use of quantitative and qualitative models, of critical thinking, of oral presentations (to be assessed next), and further complemented by three years of results from the ETS Major Field Test in Business, should provide significant information to evaluate student learning performance and to adjust plans and resource commitments accordingly.

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References


Michael Cherry is academic coordinator of Adult Business Programs and George Klemic is associate professor in the College of Business at Lewis University in Romeoville, Illinois.

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other members of the academic community. These individuals have helped make SACLO members aware of programs and opportunities on campus. They have continually supported and acknowledged our contributions and frequently provide names of students who express interest in assessment and learning objectives. Their support helps make an organization like SACLO successful.

While SACLO is a young organization, we are proud that it has made student voices part of the assessment process. Through inclusion in critical conversations and difficult decisions, students’ voices have been able to influence changes directly affecting their education. In the current sociopolitical context—with the focus on student learning, retention, and success—students must have an informed voice in these discussions and play an active part in producing solutions. Our advice on how to get more student participation in conversations about learning and assessment is to approach students and let them know that you value their input in the process. Too often students’ voices are marginalized in conversations about student learning. We hope our story "provides a template and encouragement for including students and inspiring them to play a more active role in conversations about teaching and learning on your campus.

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