

January 9, 2009

Dr. David Kimbrough,
Department of Geological Sciences

Dear David,

The American Association for Higher Education developed a number of “Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning.” With apology to David Letterman, I have adapted the list slightly, to structure those principles as a “Top Ten” list:

1. The assessment of student learning begins with educational values; it begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for our students.
2. Learning is a complex process that entails not only what students know, but what they can do with what they know. It involves not only knowledge and abilities, but also values, attitudes and habits of mind that require thoughtful (and diverse) approaches to measurement.
3. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes. Assessment as a process leads a campus toward clarity about where to aim and what standards to apply.
4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes, but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes. To improve outcomes, faculty and administrators need to know about student experiences along the way—about the curricula, teaching and student effort that lead to particular outcomes.
5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic. Improvement comes when assessment entails a linked series of activities that occur over time, and assessment strategies must be continually evaluated and refined in order to ensure success.
6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved. Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Educational quality is a collective effort.
7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of relevance and illuminates questions that people really care about. To be useful, information collected must be connected to issues or questions that people value.
8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change. Successful assessment is directed toward improvement, and its most important contribution comes on campuses where the quality of teaching and learning is visibly valued and worked at.
9. Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public; assessment provides a way to document outcomes and to inform constituents of the ways in which campus programs and services positively affect students, community and society.
10. Assessment is less about oversight and more about improving student learning. All assessment efforts need to be handled in a mutually supportive environment. It is essential for faculty to understand the importance and benefits of assessment and to recognize its intrinsic value.

Within the context of these assessment principles, I thank you for submitting your annual report. Members of the Student Learning Outcomes Committee have reviewed the report, and I convey their specific comments, suggestions, and questions by way of this letter (next page). It is my hope that you will perceive this review process in the same manner as do we: as a collaborative process, with the goal of enhancing student learning.

Committee Response to Your 2008-2009 Annual Assessment Report

The committee commends your and the department for its comprehension of the assessment process, the sophistication of the methods it is developing, and the enthusiastic commitment to assessment so evident in its latest report.

That the department lists no less than seven changes implemented since last year impressively attests to the sheer time and energy it has been willing to invest in the development of effective assessment. Foremost among these changes is the centralization of online assessment data collection via Blackboard. The lengthy discussion of this item under section I clearly establishes its advantages. The department is correct to assert that the development of rigorous methods of data collection is, along with the development of valid assessment instruments, of crucial importance to the assessment process. It seems clear that, with this adaptation of a familiar technology to serve the ends of a more inclusive and usefully demarcated data collection, the department is helping to pioneer an innovation that could serve as a model for other departments.

The other changes listed also seem worthy, including, for example, the adoption of the Statistics Concept Inventory as an instrument for evaluating student learning outcomes for statistics. The committee also commends the department's attention to the task of measuring the effectiveness of its participation in the programs of General Education and Liberal Studies.

The revised rubric for senior thesis defense reflects a concern for both communication skills and grasp of scientific concepts on the part of majors in the Geological Sciences. We note that there has been effort expended to specify criteria specific to the objectives targeted for assessment, as was recommended by the SLO committee in last year's letter. Again, we suggest adding descriptive standards for each of the levels possible for evaluation, to achieve even greater specificity. The committee also supports the department's still evolving plans to modify the content of Geol 498A.

The committee suggests that the department reconsider its reliance on the verb "understand" in its statement of various learning objectives (5.1-3). By clarifying what would go in a rubric to demonstrate what is expected of students to demonstrate their "understanding," the department could work backward to state that expectation in the outcome ("evaluate," "use appropriate investigative methods," "give examples of," and so forth). (Brock Allen is always ready and willing to have a discussion regarding the verb "understand"!)

The reviewers applaud the fact that your department is determined to address all of the significant skill sets and programmatic articulations for which it is responsible. The Student Learning Outcomes committee commends your responsibility, creativity, and sustained commitment.

Highest regards,

Chris Frost

Christopher Frost, Ph.D.
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