

December 21, 2007

Dr. David Kimbrough,
Department of Geological Sciences

Dear David,

National conversations about higher education, as well as WASC expectations, emphasize the importance of assessing student learning and using the results for program improvement. As you may know, assessment and student learning outcomes continue to figure prominently in current discussions about reform of higher education, including on-going negotiations between government agencies and various accreditation organizations. The intensity of the national conversation is but one of many indicators that point to increased scrutiny of university assessment. That said, the SDSU Student Learning Outcomes committee is most concerned with *the intrinsic value of the process*, one wherein the goal is “finding out if whether the students know and are able to do what you expect them to know and do.” This process necessarily begins, of course, by defining what we want our students to know and do. By earnestly undertaking the annual process, programs and departments can then identify precisely where and how to improve—so that student learning can be enhanced to meet the goals that faculty have established. The Annual Assessment Report at San Diego State University furthers this conversation by requiring the inclusion of evidence of student learning outcomes assessment and discussion of how the results are used for improving a program.

Put another way, the SDSU annual assessment reports are intended as a means to an important end, that is, as a process that adds value to programs and that is aligned with related evaluation efforts (WASC Accreditation, Academic Program Review, annual Academic Plans, and for some programs, professional accreditation). Although the Student Learning Outcomes committee provides a list of questions to help departments structure their report, we encourage departments and programs to respond in a manner that best aligns with their particular accreditation and academic review format and cycle. Some accrediting organizations, for example, already employ well-developed standards for evaluating program components and treat assessment as a critical part of accreditation. In such cases, we encourage programs to submit their annual reports in the same style and format as used for accreditation, *with one caveat*: If a respective professional accreditation process does not include measurement of student learning, then the program would need to do so independently. For programs and departments that do not undergo professional accreditation, we encourage you to align the annual reports with the institutional accreditation cycle and with your academic program review cycle. It is our fervent wish that the annual reports assist you in this endeavor, rather than become an additional burden on your faculty and staff.

Within this context, we thank you for submitting your annual assessment report. Members of the Student Learning Outcomes Committee have reviewed the report, using a review template that aligns with the annual report questions (when applicable), and we offer specific comments, suggestions, and questions by way of this letter.

Committee Response to Your 2006-2007 Annual Assessment Report

The committee commends the department for its clearly defined goals, student learning outcomes, and corresponding assessment measures. In particular the committee acknowledges the efforts that the department is making in implementing the suggestions and comments from last year's review. It is clear that the department has taken comments from previous years reviews to heart, addressed them clearly, and acted upon them. For example, the committee was glad to see that the department has decided to put greater focus on fewer objectives, and believes that the result is a clearer focus defined by more manageable data.

The committee commends the department for its assessment of the conceptual framework of entry level students in the web-based GEOL 100 course. It is worthy of note that the department has solidified its assessment cycle and created a departmental assessment web page. Very positive changes, indeed. Additionally, it is very encouraging to see that—based on results from the thesis defense observations—the department is planning to modify the content of Geol498A, to address written and oral communication and presentation skills.

The committee also acknowledges the development and addition of a rubric for the senior thesis. This refinement was helpful in understanding how the department was using data for assessment purposes. Upon reviewing the rubric, the committee would like to provide some feedback and suggestions for continued development of focused assessment measures. While the rubric does a comprehensive job of outlining criteria with which to evaluate the merits of the senior thesis, it could be improved by developing criteria that are specific to the objectives targeted for assessment. For example, in its current state, the rubric does not assess specifically the degree to which students can “*understand and interpret earth systems and complex system-scale interactions from the integration of diverse geoscientific data,*” but perhaps that is implied from the overall performance of the presentation. Additionally, the rubric could be improved by adding descriptive standards for each of the levels possible for evaluation. For example, under “Content, Organization” a score of one might be described as presentation is devoid of organization, or introduction, methods, results, interpretations, and conclusions; a score of 2 might be described as presentation uses appropriate sections but is lacking appropriate order of presentation; and a score of 4 might be described as presentation uses the appropriate organizational content and structure.

In summary, the committee commends your continued and diligent efforts at collecting assessment data and encourages the department to continue to refine its assessment process (to include, e.g., both qualitative and quantitative data). And in closing, we salute you on a job well done.

Highest regards,

Chris Frost

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