Closing the Assessment Loop

Some notable AY 2015-16 examples from SAS departments and programs

Departments and programs across the School of Arts and Sciences have implemented and reported on a broad array of assessments of their majors and minors: there are many best practices we could cite as examples of evidence-based decision-making.

In the reports for academic year 2015-16, many departments implemented changes to their programs based on that assessment evidence. A few notable examples are highlighted here.
The Geography Department has a 3-year assessment cycle of successive review of each of its three major tracks. In AY 2015-16, they developed a curriculum map for the track in Global Cultures, Economics and Society, aligning all required and elective courses of the program curriculum with specific program goals, and developing rubrics to assess student learning outcomes for those goals. The learning goals for this track were directly assessed in a 400-level capstone-level course required of all Geography majors. In a dedicated class session, students completed an essay writing assignment designed to prompt for their ability to synthesize and examine critically a range of contemporary issues, and identify and apply appropriate analytic tools and models.

All the essays were scored by a single reviewer, using the program rubrics. Most students demonstrated satisfactory or better achievement of the goals, but the results for one goal suggested room for improvement, with few students performing above a satisfactory level. In response, the department scheduled a meeting in Fall 2016 for the instructors teaching the courses identified in the curriculum map as specifically addressing this goal: they will discuss how to improve the student learning outcomes in this area, closing the assessment loop by incorporating the results into decisions about course content and delivery.

In AY 2016-17, the Geography department will move on to a similar review of the Environment track of the major, with development of a curriculum map and program-specific assessment rubrics, and the implementation of direct assessments in a capstone-level course of that program.
Criminal Justice has set standards for student achievement of its program goals at both introductory and culminating levels of its required curriculum, and looks for evidence of improvement as students progress through the major. At both ends of the sequence, assessment results have suggested modifications to course design and delivery to improve future student performance.

In the Criminal Justice introductory course, students are presented with case scenarios and prompted to interpret them. This requires them to demonstrate achievement of the program goals for (1) critical analysis of ethical issues, and (2) the ability to apply concepts and theories in specific criminal justice situations. The results of this assessment have revealed variation in student performance across different sections of the course. In AY 2014-15, the poorest student performance was in the section of an instructor teaching the course for the first time. Sharing the assessment results with this instructor and providing the instructor support helped to narrow the student performance gap. This year, the assessment results showed that students enrolled online achieved less satisfactory results overall than did those in face-to-face sections. The department is now exploring the reasons for this.

The Criminal Justice goals were assessed at the other end of the program sequence as well. A capstone-level rubric defines desired outcomes for the goals at or near completion: this was used to score final papers in multiple 400-level courses for research design and critical thinking skills, critical command of criminal justice theory, and knowledge of the institutions and policies of the criminal justice system. Overall, results were very strong, though weaknesses were found in student achievement of research methods goals. This confirms past observations about the disadvantage of having to rely on research methods courses offered in other departments, which led to Criminal Justice to develop its own methods course. Instructors involved in its design will develop an appropriate assessment for the course, and follow-up assessments in the 400-level courses will explore how effectively this close-the-loop action helps to close the gap in student learning outcomes over time.
Marine Sciences assesses student achievement of program learning goals in its capstone courses for its four major options. The results for AY 2015-16 revealed that many students in the Marine Biology option were not meeting the program benchmarks. These results were confirmed in comments from students on evaluations that they felt overwhelmed by the amount of material in the course.

The department plans to revise the capstone-equivalent course and the content, delivery, and required sequence of this program track. The modifications will update and re- apportion course content and the associated student workloads to improve student mastery of the Marine Sciences learning goals, and to sustain their progress to successful completion of the program.