Suggestions for Assessment Reports 2013

Having read several iterations of departmental undergraduate major assessment reports over the last several years it occurs to us that some general suggestions for preparing the next round of assessment reports might be helpful. Of course, we are happy to acknowledge that a number of departments have prepared thoughtful, informative reports and need no guidance from us. But not all departmental assessment reports have met the same standard, and in any event the continuing turnover of chairs and directors of undergraduate studies means that every year a few colleagues will be writing assessment reports for the first time. Thus, these suggestions:

- Describe in the first part of the report the learning objectives/expectations your department has for its undergraduate majors. It will be helpful if these objectives can be verified with evidence readily collectible. This may not be easy in some instances. For example, if a stated goal is that students should come to appreciate the beauty or complexity of some concept or subject, what evidence will persuasively demonstrate appreciation? For that matter, what evidence would verify deeper understanding of some topic? When thinking about learning objectives, think about the kinds of problems a major in your department should be able to solve, the skills that can be demonstrated or applied, the material that can be summarized, criticized, or paraphrased, and the subjects or courses that can be recalled, connected and integrated.

- When developing learning objectives, don’t overlook such College wide objectives as clear, persuasive writing and fluent articulate speech. A seminar paper, a capstone project, or a senior honors thesis could all be used to demonstrate writing—and if the work has to be presented orally, perhaps in a power point or poster session, oral skills can also be assessed. An oral exam can also be used to verify speaking skills while also capturing the breadth of subject knowledge, awareness of disciplinary debates or controversies, or other learning objectives.

- A written exam during the second semester of senior year may also be used to assess a variety of learning goals. A capstone course required of all majors could serve much the same purpose. In any case, your report should indicate whether your department offers (or requires) a capstone course. If your assessment process only involves a sample of students, or a sample of papers or theses then describe how the sample was selected and the confidence you have in making general statements about all your majors based on your sample. It will not be sufficient only to assess the learning of students who show up for pizza or a free gift card.

- Worth noting is that tasks to be assessed that are embedded in a regular or capstone course are more likely to be highly motivated and reflect accurately on a student’s knowledge and skill than a separate assessment exercise in which a volunteer student has no stake.

- After an assessment report describes the learning objectives then it should show how each objective has been assessed and should report the results or findings. It is not sufficient to generally describe a department’s assessment activities or processes, but not describe the results. What levels of mastery or proficiency were demonstrated with regard to each learning goal, and with what evidence? How was the assessment conducted (faculty committee, individual faculty members, graduate teaching assistants), and using what standards? It will not be plausible simply to assert that all students achieved all objectives at an outstanding level. Rather, be clear about the performance standards that have been set for at least three performance levels – outstanding, satisfactory, unsatisfactory – for example.

- The report’s conclusion may certainly describe indirect evidence of learning—prizes won, elections to honorary groups, admissions to graduate and professional programs, strong career placement record, but such indirect evidence of learning is no substitute for direct assessment. The conclusion should also show with whom assessment results were shared, and what if any actions have taken place as a result. That is, where assessment results used to strengthen or improve the department’s advising, course requirements or teaching practices? Finally, while all learning outcomes might not be assessed equally rigorously in a given cycle, it should be evident what the department's priorities have been (and assessment practices should reflect them).