



## Promoting Change: Moving Toward a Culture of Assessment

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Like many other schools around the country, the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences at the George Washington University (GW) has recently turned its focus to the assessment of student learning, particularly assessment at the undergraduate level.

### ASSESSMENT EFFORTS IN THE COLUMBIAN COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES: ZERO TO SIXTY IN FIFTEEN MONTHS

The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences is the oldest and largest of the schools that comprise the George Washington University, a research institution. The college consists of more than forty departments, with forty-six undergraduate majors in the arts, humanities, mathematics, natural sciences, and social sciences. It also offers thirty-four master's programs, twenty-six combined bachelor's/master's programs, and twenty doctoral programs.

The focus on the assessment of student learning in the Columbian College has been motivated, at least in part, by recommendations from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in its 2008 accreditation report. In that report, the Middle States Commission recommended that the Columbian College implement “a comprehensive, organized, and sustained process for the assessment of student learning outcomes, including evidence that assessment results are used for improvement.”

While the college as a whole had not created or implemented any college-wide plan for the assessment of student learning, there were some individual units within the college that had been assessing student learning for some time. These units, in conjunction with the university's assessment office, provided valuable resources for the college as it moved forward.

To promote a culture of assessment in the Columbian College, an ad hoc college task force was created. Next, a number of significant faculty development strategies, aimed particularly at chairs and key college personnel, were implemented. The task force—comprised of faculty, staff, and college administrators—was appointed by the dean of the college at the beginning of fall semester 2008. Included in this group were several well-respected senior faculty members in the college, a few faculty members who had some knowledge and experience in assessment, some recently-tenured faculty, an associate dean of the college, and the chief assessment officer of the university.

The task force produced a report offering a clear and simple template to be used by departments to articulate their learning outcomes and assessment strategies. Also included was a timetable for implementation. The timetable was arguably the most important outcome, as it recommended that all course syllabi list learning outcomes by the beginning of the 2009 academic year, that all departments submit an assessment plan by October 15, 2009, and that departments begin the implementation of the plan by the end of the 2009–10 academic year.

The dean of the college recognized that the recommendations of the task force could not be effectively implemented without significant faculty development. By bringing local and national experts to the college and creating venues for discussion, we facilitated internal faculty development. In academic year 2008–09, one of the most important venues in the college for internal faculty development was the monthly department chairs and program directors meeting, at which assessment of student learning was repeatedly addressed. When assessment experts were brought to campus, we arranged separate meetings with the department chairs and these experts.



## EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Besides internal faculty development, the college took advantage of a number of external opportunities for faculty development. These included sending key college personnel, both faculty and administrators, to assessment meetings sponsored by organizations such as AAC&U and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Among the most helpful of these was the AAC&U Engaging Departments Institute in July 2009 at the University of Pennsylvania. A team of young department chairs and program directors from the Columbian College attended this institute and asked to carry away some strategies for piloting a modest but workable assessment plan in his or her unit. The team members were to present their progress on these plans to the chairs of the college at their fall retreat. We hoped that these team members would function both as a resource and an example for other chairs in the college.

As the mid-October deadline for assessment plans submission approached, the discussions about assessment intensified. However, the conversations, both public and private, changed markedly. They were no longer dominated by resistance, but instead turned toward the practical. Chairs began to ask “how” rather than “why.” They also began to ask for help in creating their assessment plans. Fortunately, the university’s chief assessment officer had hired a recently retired and well-respected faculty member for the specific purpose of assisting departments to create these plans. The respect that this individual commanded, her thorough understanding of the principles of assessment, and her dogged determination to reach out to as many departments as possible greatly assisted the college’s efforts to meet the October 15 deadline.

Although the effort to implement serious and sustainable assessment of student learning in the Columbian College

is by no means completed, the first major hurdle has been cleared. Plans for the assessment of the Columbian College’s more than one hundred programs have been gathered. In addition, many individual faculty members have complied with the task force’s recommendation to add learning outcomes at the beginning of their syllabi.

The broad strokes of this summary cannot do justice to the remarkable progress that the college has made in a little more than a year. The progress was certainly due, in large measure, to the determined leadership of the dean and the significant assistance of the university’s assessment office. However, it could not have happened without the thoughtful deliberation of key faculty members and chairs—including those who attended the Engaging Departments Institute—who realized not only the necessity of implementing assessment but also its potential value to the academic enterprise.

## THE ENGAGING DEPARTMENTS INSTITUTE

The Engaging Departments Institute offered a unique opportunity for faculty development by providing the GW team with the chance to bring together an important group of young faculty members to discuss specific ways to advance assessment throughout the college. The associate dean for undergraduate studies led the team, which included faculty members chosen from the rising generation of leadership in the college. Three of the team members were new or relatively new departmental chairs or program directors, including the chair of the geography department, the chair of the department of theater and dance, and the director of the first-year writing program. The fourth team member was the incoming deputy chair of the department of music, who will assume the role of chair in the 2010–11 academic year.

Each team member was charged with the task of outlining a programmatic assessment plan for his or her unit. In addition, the team as a whole was asked to consider ways to assess the general education curriculum of the college. Although this was not the team members’ primary task, they were prompted to keep general education in mind while thinking about their own programmatic assessment plans.

The team dedicated the first of its discussions to general education. Following the discussion of general education, its possibilities, and the assessment of it, the team shifted its focus to the individual disciplines represented. Examining the general education goals of the college first proved to be a valuable exercise because the discussion provided a backdrop against which to consider the curricula and the assessment of each team member’s individual program.

Each team member led a session focused on his or her academic unit. While the assessment of student learning played a major role in each of these discussions, conversation among the team inevitably moved beyond that topic. The understanding that any potentially sensitive details of these conversations were “off the record” generated an atmosphere of trust within the team. This atmosphere enabled each team member to lay out candidly both the challenges facing him or her and aspirations for change. While one person led the discussion, the rest of the team participated by asking questions and making suggestions—in short, by helping the leader brainstorm.

As might be expected, each team member articulated challenges unique to his or her discipline or situation at the university. For example, a major assessment challenge facing both of the departments in the arts is the issue of subjectivity. Assessing musical or dance performance is one thing, but how does one assess student creativity in choreography, composition, or



design? In addition, thoughtful questions were raised about the potential negative consequences that significant assessment might have on an academic unit in the arts.

The challenges faced by the university writing program, although quite different, are no less significant. Particularly noteworthy for that program is the multiplicity of audiences that any assessment of student writing at GW must address. These included the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the GW administration, the university writing faculty, and the field of composition theory. The dilemma is, of course, how the program should focus its assessment, given the conflicting needs of its audiences.

Although unique concerns were expressed by each team member, one common concern emerged: the issue of breadth within some academic fields. The geography department, for instance, includes faculty in both physical geography (natural science) and human geography (social science), and it expects its majors to attain proficiency across these diverse disciplines. That same department also contains the environmental studies program.

The broad expanse of the discipline is also a factor in both the department of music and the department of theater and dance. The music department covers the history of music, theory and composition, and performance; competence in each of these areas is expected of all students. In the department of theater and dance, students of dance are expected to attain competence in choreography, dance, and dance history, while students of theater need to gain competence in acting, production, and the history of the theater. The breadth of each of these departments poses significant challenges for the effective and sustained assessment of student learning.

But the breadth of these departments also raises concerns only tangentially

related to the assessment of student learning. For instance, one important challenge the chairs of such departments face is the “factionalization” of the faculty or the isolation of faculty members from one another. This fragmentation is inevitably exacerbated by the teaching specializations of the faculty. Faculty research can further erode departmental coherence, with faculty in one department attending differently focused conferences and publishing in the journals of their specialization. In departments such as these, motivating faculty to look at the bigger picture and to actively consider the goals of the department or program (rather than one’s specialized teaching or research agenda) can be challenging.

However, while the number of challenges articulated above may give the impression that these issues dominated the conversations, the team spent most of its time problem solving. The conversation about assessment in each of the team’s discussions usually began with the question, “How can we assess student learning in this program?” but then shifted to “How can we use assessment as a tool to facilitate positive programmatic change?”

The members of the team thought about using program assessment as a strategy for positive change in a number of different ways. For instance, a team member suggested that the effective assessment of student learning could be used as an evidence-based argument for curricular change. Alternatively, another team member suggested that assessment could be used to articulate a department’s strengths to the university or even to outside constituencies. As everyone knows, it is difficult for academic units to attract resources. However, *documented* success is a powerful tool of persuasion.

There was significant discussion about the possibility of using assessment as a

tool to encourage a sense of a shared mission within the kind of broadly focused department mentioned above. While faculty may diverge in research interests or teaching expertise, they all share a common cohort of students. The assessment of student learning inevitably raises the issue of a department’s mission and can help a department work as a unit. In short, by the end of the institute, because of their frank and thoughtful discussions, the team members recognized the potential that the assessment of student learning had for renewing and empowering their own academic units.

## CONCLUSION

While attending the Engaging Departments Institute did not provide a magic solution to the assessment challenges faced by the Columbian College, our participation nevertheless played an important role in the implementation of a culture of assessment in the college. Although only four of the almost fifty department chairs or program directors took part in the institute, the young leaders who did attend brought back important insights to the college and their individual units. Perhaps more important, the kind of interactions that occurred among the members of the Columbian College team should serve as an example for the kinds of productive discussions that can take place among other college leaders on our campus and elsewhere.

Therefore, the Engaging Departments Institute was central to the advances made by the GW team in understanding and promoting assessment in the Columbian College. It provided both professional guidance about assessment, an opportunity to interact closely with colleagues from different disciplines, and a safe space away from campus to foster discussion about a topic crucial to effective education but also often misunderstood. ■

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