

2006 Workshop for Department Chairs—Planning for Assessment and Accountability Issues

Assessment Advice for Beginners

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There is a great deal of unnecessary confusion out there about assessment of student learning. The theories are inconsistent, the processes are overly complex, and the advice is contradictory. There are national assessment experts telling us what to do, discipline-specific assessment experts telling us what to do, and institution-based assessment experts telling us what to do. And they all seem to speak a different language. The one point on which they all seem to agree is that we have to begin doing it; no more stalling.

The national push for assessment of student learning in higher education has met with a variety of reactions in political science departments across the country, ranging from cynical hostility to blithe acquiescence. Some (usually research-university faculty) see the current emphasis on assessment as a “passing fad” to be “waited out,” while others (usually liberal arts-college faculty) embrace it as an “opportunity” to improve teaching through the cultivation of a “culture of assessment.” Generally speaking, the discipline of political science is still in the embryonic stage of the assessment life cycle. Nursing, on the other hand, is years ahead of us. Largely driven by licensing and certification issues, nursing had to be at the vanguard of assessment. Does this mean that we, in political science, must now run to catch up? Not necessarily.

For political science departments just beginning to develop an assessment plan, my strategic advice is to split the difference between the Pollyannaish optimists and the curmudgeonly skeptics. Assessment is coming, whether we like it or not, but a first assessment plan must be built carefully, not “embraced” idealistically. The greatest dangers for beginners are either not taking assessment seriously enough and doing too little of real value, or being too ambitious and trying to do too much in the first plan. Both seem to me to be recipes for failure.

While it is true that the national pressure for assessment of student learning

The 2006 Workshop for Department Chairs, held at the Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, focused on the theme of “Planning for Assessment and Accountability Issues.” Moderated by Stephen Majeski, chair, department of political science, University of Washington, and of the APSA Departmental Services Committee, the session included presentations by four speakers with notable experience on this topic: Kerstin Hamann, University of Central Florida; Michelle Deardorf, Jackson State University; Ken Campbell, University of Delaware; Linda Suskie, Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Kerstin Hamann and Michelle Deardorf have been very active on assessment-related issues (in their departments and in the APSA Conference on Teaching & Learning), and Ken Campbell has been the University of Delaware department’s point person on a recent planning effort on assessment. All three were able to share their unique perspectives on the theme at the individual and departmental levels, while Linda Suskie was able to provide a broad conceptualization of the issue and share her insights in what accrediting bodies look for and the resources they can provide.

The presentations were followed by a lively Q&A with the 53 department chairs in attendance. To convey the substance of the presentation to the wider audience of APSA members, each workshop speaker has helpfully summarized their presentation in the following set of articles. I encourage you to contact them directly with specific questions on their perspective on assessment, as well as to contact us here at APSA (dsp@apsanet.org) with any comments or suggestions.

The topic for the 2007 Workshop for Department Chairs will be announced via PS and the APSA department chairs’ eNewsletter this spring.—Bahram M. Rajaei, APSA Director, International & External Relations

in higher education is politically motivated, it is also true that assessment, done right, can improve our teaching and our students’ learning. We in academia are being offered the chance to develop and control the assessment process within our departments, colleges, and universities. However, if we do not do it, someone else will do it for us, and we will almost assuredly not like the result. At this point, regional accreditation agencies are insisting that we demonstrate good assessment practices. But we would be wise to shift the dynamic from *assessment under duress* to *assessment for improvement*. For departments completely new to assessment, this must be done modestly. Learn to crawl before you walk; walk before you try to run.

Keep the first assessment plan simple, short, practical, and effective. Choose only three or four “learning outcomes” (not 10 or 15), such as critical thinking, good communication skills, and demonstrated knowledge of key concepts in political science. Develop a couple of measurement tools for each learning goal. Direct measures (e.g., exams) are preferred by the accrediting agencies over indirect measures (e.g., surveys). Tailor your plan to your department’s particular conditions. If you have the time and

resources to involve the entire faculty in the development of this first plan, this is certainly preferable, as the faculty will immediately feel “ownership.” If, however, your department is overextended, as so many are in this era of political-science popularity among undergraduate majors, then perhaps an assessment committee and/or an assessment “fellow” in your department is more appropriate. In any case, your college or university administration, if serious about assessment, must provide your department additional resources and/or release time so you can learn about assessment and to develop a serious and successful first plan.

Finally, and this is a most important point, the cycle of assessment must be completed by interpreting the results of your chosen measurement devices and using those results to further improve your teaching. Simply reporting the results of assessment may satisfy the cynics in your department, but it will displease the accrediting body, waste your time and effort, and squander a great opportunity to improve your teaching.

Note

* For further information about simple, practical assessment, see Linda Suskie, *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing, 2004).