

Vertical Assessment: From Assent/Ascent to Descent/Dissent

Texas A&M University's 9th Annual Assessment Conference

23 February 2009

Rationale

Vertical assessment, whether top-down or bottom-up, entails

- securing champions;
- understanding terminology;
- making vertical connections while crafting goals, outcomes, targets, strategies, and criteria;
- recruiting and training faculty members;
- developing, pilot testing, and administering the tools;
- analyzing the resulting data;
- making changes; and
- repeating the process.

In addition to facing technological and financial challenges, *we must garner support at every stage*. This session discusses an assessment matrix that links university, college, department, program, and classroom goals and competencies, taking the conference theme of "Using Assessment to Drive Improvement" in two directions: upwards for accountability purposes and downwards for improving student performance in the classroom. Stories about and strategies for dealing with agents of assent (those who help pave the way to assessment success) and dissent (those who toss obstacles in our paths) at each level are paramount to understanding steps that can lead to cooperation, support, and ultimately change.

We look closely at what actually happens at the program and course levels that affects (positively and negatively) the translation of university and college goals and objectives into concrete program and course assessment tools with the potential for improving those same programs and course offerings. Finally, we offer suggestions *from the trenches* for success.

The Matrix

*By Jacqueline S. Palmer, Senior Lecturer and Undergraduate Assessment Coordinator,
Department of English, Texas A&M University*

Purpose

The matrix demonstrates how assessing and making instructional changes based on those assessments can lead to improved programs and simultaneously fulfill college and/or university expectations that can then be used to ensure we are accountable for our actions. It can serve as a useful (if not indispensable) mechanism for the following:

- helping individuals *at all levels* understand how what they are doing aligns with efforts at other levels
- providing instructors a stronger sense of how what they are being asked to do fits into the institution's larger assessment plan
- identifying focal areas needing attention
- developing reiterative long-range program assessment plans

Background

The first challenge that I faced as Undergraduate Assessment Coordinator was to quickly learn what had been accomplished to date and determine the extent to which those actions aligned with new online reporting requirements trickling down from the College of Liberal Arts. Although the process I followed was somewhat haphazard, I offer the following suggestions (roughly chronological) to help streamline efforts you may undertake.

Even though the suggestions may appear straight-forward, re-visit lessons *from all levels* (see subsequent sections), many of which will require rather large blocks of time to garner the support you will need and generate the momentum optimal for connecting actions at each level.

Suggestions

1. Read/study all program and departmental reports developed over the previous decade.
2. If possible, confer with administrators who spearheaded assessment projects and/or wrote the reports.
3. Begin to develop a spreadsheet/timeline of past and ongoing program assessment activities, assuming there are any. (If not, skip to step 4.)
 - a. Add a column for each semester in which a measurement tool was administered.
 - b. List major objectives for each tool. (These may be either program or student objectives.)
4. Identify relevant course and program areas to be assessed:
 - **Professional Organization.** This is a good place to find relevant standards developed by respected professionals in your field of study. (For instance, we based some questions on research standards published by the Modern Language Association.)
 - **Department, College, or University.** Your department, college, or university may have been through a process of establishing priorities or developing a short or long-term vision of success. If so, those entities may have identified focal areas related to your program.
 - **Published National Standardized Tests.** While many questions may not be related to your program, others are the result of a national consensus-building process indicating program or student expectations.
5. Modify the spreadsheet/timeline by adding columns for each relevant vertical level. (In our case, the department is so large that goals/objectives are set at the program rather than the departmental level. However, both the college and university have established priority areas.)
6. For each vertical level, add sub-columns listing specific goals, objectives, competencies, or outcomes, grouping them across levels whenever possible.
 - a. For instance, this **course** objective, "Select appropriate print and electronic sources for research in English," pertains to this **program** outcome, "Students will exit the program competent researchers," which in turn aligns with the

- stated **college** competency, “Demonstrate critical analytical skills,” all of which are part of the **university** goal of “Enhancing the Undergraduate Academic Experience.”
- b. One or more levels may require you to establish target achievement levels; if so, add sub-columns as needed.
 7. Link goals and objectives of current or previously administered assessment instruments with priority areas set by any of the groups in step 4. (See also 6a.) This will require moving spreadsheet content up and down to align with different rows.
 8. Use this matrix to plan future assessments.
 - a. What assessment cycle has been followed in the past? Is this appropriate for your institution?
 - b. At what education level have students previously been assessed? Should there be consistency?
 - c. To what extent have the same skills, knowledge, abilities, or preferences been routinely assessed? Is this enough to make program generalizations over time?
 - d. To what extent do program goals, objectives, and assessment strategies generate results required by the college and/or university?

Lessons Learned

By Claude Gibson, Professor & Director of Undergraduate Studies, Department of English, Texas A&M University

This list offers tips (chronological from a process perspective) resulting from over a decade of program assessment.

1. It is best to work from an up-to-date mission statement that is aligned with the college and university mission statements. Most faculty are interested in contributing to this phase. A department or program’s mission should be a complement to those of college and university. Congruence assures assessment activity will be understood and appreciated in the higher echelon. And your own faculty will understand what your assessment projects are validating.
2. Expected student learning outcomes not only should be derivable from the mission statement but must be. Modify either or both to assure this happens.
3. Keep department administrators and instructors well informed about all planned activities from initial assessment proposals through development through implementation (transparency) may allay misgivings and suspicions while eliciting important input and/or support. False steps can be avoided.
4. Initially at least, coordinators/principal investigators should think small and use only volunteers. The classes of three or four instructors can often provide a sufficient sample. For our projects conducted in 2003, 2006, and 2009, we have recruited a total of 23 instructors, but never used more than 11 or fewer than 3.
5. Coordinators should plan to do both direct and indirect assessment. It can be illuminating to identify disconnects between what instructors find and students think. And if the indirect assessment uses nationally administered instruments as well as locally developed ones, important comparisons are possible. Findings sometimes can be better understood than they would have been in geographic isolation.

6. If possible, “experts” should vet all assessment instruments prior to administration—surveys, rubrics, etc.—as well as all collected data afterwards. Piloting is always a good idea.
7. The final report, a critical document, needs to be accessible to all potential users, as well as succinct and clear in its presentation of findings, recommendations, and action plans.
8. The input of administrators and faculty is crucial to implementing change and identifying elements for future analysis and study.

Concrete results of our assessments include the expansion of the number of writing-intensive and inquiry-based courses in the English curriculum at all levels and workshops and model syllabi, developed particularly for those teaching multi-sectioned courses.

Since our Dean annually requests that departments report the number of writing-intensive and inquiry courses offered as well as the names of those teaching them, faculty have become much more responsive to the call for volunteers. If the higher administration deems something important, then faculty members deem it important.

Agents: English 104 and 203 Inquiry Projects

By Joanna Gibson, Sr. Lecturer & Director of Writing Programs, Department of English, Texas A&M University

Bob Wyckoff, Ph.D. candidate, Department of English, Texas A&M University

During the fall and spring semesters 2007-2008, the Writing Programs Office at Texas A&M University committed to implementing inquiry into our only semester of first-year composition, English 104, Composition and Rhetoric, and also into English 203, Introduction to Literature, a course with a strong writing component. We started by revising student learning outcomes to reflect an emphasis on inquiry, working with the general definition of inquiry provided by the University. The next step was examining course curriculum, determining changes that would place emphasis on inquiry, and developing a rubric for assessment. In December 2008, we asked students and instructors in five sections of each course to assess student papers using the rubric we developed. Later this semester, we will use the data from assessment of student papers to revise course curriculum and develop workshops. Our inquiry project has involved faculty, graduate-assistant teachers, and students. Overall, we are pleased with our progress, but we are aware that there will always be agents of assent and dissent—and that some of these agents straddle the fence.

Agents of Dissent

- **The threat of standardization.** Instructors who have had relative freedom in structuring course content are often leery of or outright opposed to any standardization in their teaching
- **The threat of yet another form of evaluation.** Faced with student course evaluations and annual review, instructors may be opposed to yet another form of evaluation, especially if they don't have a context for the evaluation.
- **Existing rubrics for assessment.** The two teams assessing student papers had difficulty norming because of different interpretations of the rubric.

- **Committees.** Large committees allow inclusion, but our experience was that a large committee moved slowly, with a small number of people attending all meetings.
- **Instructors who resist change in any form**

Agents of Assent

- **Funding.** Our inquiry project was funded by a Quality Enhancement Grant from the College of Liberal Arts. With funding, we knew we would find participants for reading student papers. In addition to providing compensation for extra work, funding streamlines planning and implementation.
- **Administrators with experience and expertise in assessment.** While information about assessment was available to us online, the two most helpful resources were our own Director of Undergraduate Programs and the TAMU Office of Measurement and Research Services.
- **Existing rubrics for assessment.** We linked six of the eleven items on our English 203 rubric and five of the ten items on the English 104 rubric to the rubric the Director of Undergraduate Programs developed for program review.
- **Committees.** We worked with both large and small committees. Committee meetings were crucial for sharing information and ideas.
- **Instructors.** Many are willing to buy in and be subject to another form of evaluation. We implemented inquiry in all sections of English 203 in fall 2008.
- **Volunteers.** We were pleasantly surprised at the number of English 104 instructors who volunteered to participate in our project. They were willing to consider curricular changes and to attend workshops on inquiry.

Presenter Bio Sketches

Jackie Palmer, a Senior Lecturer at Texas A&M University, College Station, routinely teaches undergraduate courses in technical writing, technical editing, and web writing. With prior publications and experience as part of the Regional Educational Laboratory Network's Alternative Assessment Task Force, she currently assists administrators in the Writing Programs and Undergraduate Offices in fulfilling university assessment requirements (for accountability purposes) and in developing criteria and rubrics to assess student performance in the classroom.

Claude Gibson, Director of Undergraduate Studies in English at Texas A&M University, has been heavily involved in certification, program, course, and writing assessment since 1990. In 2007 he and his co-investigator received certificates of achievement for excellence in quality enhancement for projects assessing and improving the undergraduate program in English.

Joanna Gibson, Senior Lecturer and Director of Writing Programs at Texas A&M University, College Station, oversees curriculum development, teacher training, and assessment for three lower-level composition courses: English 104, Composition and Rhetoric; English 203, Introduction to Literature; and English 241, Advanced Composition. She is the author of a reader/rhetoric for first-year composition courses, *Perspectives: Case Studies for Readers and Writers*, and is currently working on a textbook that emphasizes argument as a form of inquiry.

Bob Wyckoff, a PhD candidate in the Department of English at Texas A&M University, conducts research on nineteenth-century American literature, rhetoric, and pedagogy. While he has presented papers on composition pedagogy, his dissertation looks at homestead rhetoric in the nineteenth century as an extension of domesticity. Working with the Writing Programs Office to train incoming teaching assistants in administering new assessment instruments, he also implements those strategies in the course he teaches.