

Gettysburg College

Report of the
Subcommittee on
Academic Program Assessment

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Chapter I. Self-Study Process

A. Organization and Structure

1. Assessment of Student Learning

The Middle States Steering Committee (MSSC) formed a Subcommittee on Academic Program Assessment (SAPA) consisting of the MSSC's faculty members: Kathy Cain, Chris Fee, Derrick Gondwe, Tim Shannon, and Mark Warwick. The committee worked in the manner described below to evaluate learning outcomes assessment in the college's curriculum. In addition, during Academic Year 2002-03, SAPA engaged the wider college community in several discussions related to our task.

In August 2002, SAPA made a presentation on learning outcomes assessment to the departmental and program chairs at their annual retreat. That was quickly followed in early September by a faculty meeting devoted to introducing SAPA's work to the college faculty. In early Fall 2002 and again in late Spring 2003, members of SAPA reported to the Academic Affairs Committee of the college's Board of Trustees on the Middle States reaccreditation process.

In Spring 2003, SAPA met with the Academic Program and Policy Committee (APPC) to discuss its charge to report on assessment in the general education curriculum. It also reported back to the departmental and program chairs twice in the spring semester, the second time to present the MSSC's draft of the college assessment plan. In April 2003, as part of assessment expert Sandy Astin's visit to campus, SAPA participated in an all-campus Q&A session on assessment as well as a workshop devoted to assessment's role in the general education curriculum.

SAPA contributed to the drafting of the college's assessment plan in conjunction with the rest of the MSSC, at regular bi-weekly MSSC meetings and via email.

a. general education: The MSSC solicited a report from the APPC on learning assessment in the college's general education program. The report asked the APPC to evaluate its methods of collecting and reviewing assessment data on the college's Liberal Arts Core requirements. SAPA reviewed this report in Spring 2003.

b. programs and majors: In Fall 2002, the MSSC solicited reports from all academic Departments and Programs evaluating their current assessment methods. During Spring 2003, SAPA met bi-weekly and corresponded frequently by email to read, discuss, and summarize these reports, so as to identify common methods, note strengths and weaknesses, and suggest best practices for student learning outcomes assessment at the departmental and program level.

c. individual courses: In Spring 2003, SAPA solicited the course evaluations currently used by each department and program. The subcommittee then reviewed these forms so

as to identify common methods, note strengths and weaknesses, and suggest best practices.

d. learning outside the classroom: The MSSC solicited reports from the Off-Campus Studies Committee, Information Technology and Training (ITT), the Library, the Career Planning Center, and the Center for Public Service, asking each to evaluate its methods of learning outcomes assessment. SAPA reviewed those reports with particular attention to assessment of curricular-based learning for which students earned academic credit. These reports were also reviewed by the MSSC's subcommittee on co-curricular learning (chaired by Julie Ramsey).

Chapter II. Review, Discussion, and Analysis of Work Group Reports

A. Assessment of Student Learning

1. general education: For the purpose of evaluating assessment in the general education program, SAPA reviewed the report generated by the APPC. APPC oversees the implementation of the college's Liberal Arts Core (LAC) requirements, reviews proposals for new departments and programs, and assesses the First Year Seminar program. The APPC takes as its guide those goals established for the Liberal Arts Core by the faculty in 1996, and currently described in the college catalog. These goals are to have students "encounter the perspectives and modes of inquiry and analysis that characterize academic disciplines" and "to reason and communicate effectively." In its report, the APPC notes that these goals are consistent with the college's mission statement.

By the APPC's own definition, its assessment of the Liberal Arts Core is focused on the "front end" when it determines whether proposed new courses are in compliance with the overall goals stated in the College's mission statement and whether they fulfill LAC requirements.

In its report, the APPC identifies two other primary duties associated with student learning assessment. First, the APPC is initiating a review of the First Year Seminar program, which crosses departmental and program lines, and "does not have a clear locus of assessment." The First Year Seminar program, now in its seventh year, has been run by the Provost Office, and the APPC will review it to determine "whether the First Year Seminars have fulfilled the goals of the program." As part of this review, they will collect data through interviews, surveys, and review of course evaluations. Second, as a result of the restructuring of college governance in 2001-02, the APPC is now charged with assisting departments and programs in their seven -year external reviews. In this process, the APPC plans to review and assess courses offered in each department and program that fulfill Liberal Arts Core requirements.

2. programs and majors

Twenty-four departments and eight programs submitted reports on their current assessment methods. SAPA read these reports and compiled data from them for the Assessment Methods Checklist (see appendix). Each member of SAPA took responsibility for 6-7 departments or programs, avoiding taking the report filed by his or her own department. At a meeting to discuss these reports, each SAPA member identified 1-2 reports that all SAPA members should read in preparation for creating a checklist of assessment methods. The reports identified by SAPA members for special focus included those from departments that demonstrated a clear understanding, varied methods, and creative approaches to assessment.

In order to create the Assessment Methods Checklist, SAPA members listed all distinct assessment methods noted in the department reports and then grouped them according to the level at which the assessment occurs:

- **Clear Department Learning Objectives:** This category included all departments and programs that provided evidence of discussing and publishing (in the college catalog or on a web site) shared learning objectives and goals.
- **Course-Based Assessment:** This category included most of the traditional methods for assessing student learning within the confines of a single course, including exams, writing for the discipline, oral presentations, and course evaluations.
- **Capstone-based Assessment:** This category included methods for student learning assessment that are classroom-based but tailored for seniors completing a course of study in a major or minor, such as a capstone seminar, senior thesis, or defense, performance, or presentation of a project.
- **Majors-based Assessment:** This category included methods for student learning assessment aimed at determining the progress of student learning within a particular course of study. These methods typically occurred outside of any specific course and include the maintenance of student portfolios, student-faculty seminars, standardized comprehensive exams, senior exit interviews, alumni surveys, and evaluating study abroad and internships that earn credit for the major. This category also includes "Learning-Oriented Sequence," which refers to a hierarchical structure of courses through which students progress in a fixed order as they complete the program, providing faculty with the opportunity to assess student learning from one stage to the next, as each course builds on the previous one.
- **Faculty/Peer-based Assessment:** This category includes methods of assessment not dependent on student performance or feedback, but rather cooperative faculty and peer observation and review. These include peer observation and evaluation of teaching methods and content, new faculty mentoring by tenured faculty, and departmental efforts to review grading and enrollment data for the sake of improving the curriculum. In addition, several departments reported using regularly scheduled meetings or retreats for evaluating the success of the curriculum in terms of student learning.
- **External-based Assessment:** All departments and programs are required to undergo external review every seven years. In addition, a few departments are reviewed by relevant professional organizations for accreditation purposes.

It is important to bear in mind when reading the Assessment Methods Checklist that SAPA feels it under-represent the extent of assessment currently practiced at Gettysburg College for the following reasons. First, at the time the MSSC requested the reports,

some department and program heads expressed confusion or unfamiliarity with assessment methods and terminology. The MSSC tried to overcome some of this by making presentations at the August 2002 Chairs Retreat and a September 2002 faculty meeting, but these reports reflect a learning process among the faculty in general about what assessment is. Second, the MSSC wanted writing these reports to be a reflective process for the departments and programs, so rather than presenting them with exhaustive checklists or tightly defined requirements, we asked open-ended questions designed to elicit discussion and reflection. Therefore, we believe the reports reflect each department's and program's self-definition of assessment rather than meet a universal definition imposed by the MSSC. Third, in compiling the data, SAPA worked conservatively, only noting the presence of an assessment method when it was explicitly stated in the report. Thus, even the most universally accepted methods of assessment, such as exams and course evaluations, do not appear 100% of the time. For any given category of assessment, it is likely that some departments other than those indicated practice that method but failed to mention it in their report.

SAPA's analysis indicates that the great majority of departments and programs (87.5%) have published clearly defined learning objectives for their students. It appears that student learning assessment occurs most consistently at Gettysburg College at the individual course level. All departments reported practicing at least one such course-based method, and most reported using multiple methods in this category. In particular, SAPA was impressed by the number of departments and programs that make writing for the discipline a central component of their student learning assessment (81.3%). All departments except five reported having some form of capstone-based assessment, either in the form of a senior seminar or a senior project. In addition, practically all departments reported having external reviews, and all are in fact required to have them.

Areas where SAPA noted less consistency in student learning assessment were majors-based assessment and faculty/peer-based assessment. While we noted the considerable variety of methods used in majors-based assessment, eight departments reported using none of these and seven reported using only one. Furthermore, all but one method in this category are reported by used by less than 50% of the departments and programs. Methods most frequently used were learning-oriented sequence (53.1%) and alumni survey (37.5%). Likewise, faculty/peer-based assessment was less frequently cited as being used. Less than one-third of departments mentioned new faculty mentoring, peer teaching evaluation beyond promotion, and reviewing of grading and enrollment data as methods of assessment. It is likely that many departments and programs engage in these activities but do not realize their relevance for assessment of student learning.

Most departments and programs (62.5%) reported making changes based on their analysis of data collected from assessment, although not all showed evidence of a regular or systematic mechanism for reflecting and acting on these data. Four additional departments and programs (12.5%) reported plans to use assessment data to make changes in the future. Thus a majority of departments and programs are using or plan to use assessment data in evaluating and modifying their curricula. SAPA members believe that these numbers underestimate the actual number of departments using relevant data to

make changes. Some departments simply did not answer the question in their reports (we counted these as “no” responses), and all are in fact required to respond to recommendations from external reviews.

Across all departments, one clear need that emerged is for departments and programs to have a regular mechanism for reviewing assessment data. More than half (59.4%) reported meeting regularly to review assessment data, but few reported a systematic plan for these reviews. Other departments did not clarify any means by which assessment data led to changes, suggesting again an absence of a systematic process. Overall, it is clear that assessment data are used to make changes, but this process could be accomplished more thoroughly and coherently with the development of clear review strategies by each department.

Of those departments and programs that did report making changes based on assessment results, the vast majority reported making changes to the curriculum, including changes both to individual courses and to the overall organization and/or structure of the major. Some departments reported creating new courses based on needs identified in review of assessment data and/or using assessment data in deciding on areas of specialization for new faculty positions. A few departments reported that assessment results led to changes in aspects of the program not directly pertaining to the curriculum, such as the addition of visiting speakers, the creation of student organizations, or the revision of catalog material. By far the two most widely used sources of data for the changes were individual course evaluations and external reviews, although other types of data were employed as well by individual departments.

3. individual courses: Course-based assessment was a part of each department's report on assessment, which SAPA reviewed in spring 2003. In addition to reviewing and quantifying this data (see III.b. above), SAPA collected and reviewed course evaluation forms used by every department and program in the college. It is college policy that every course be evaluated by students each semester it is taught. Each department determines the style and format of its course evaluation, and several departments use different evaluation forms for different courses. These evaluations are administered and archived by the individual departments and programs, and are used by faculty for self-evaluation and by departments and programs and the Provost Office for pre-tenure, tenure, and promotion reviews.

Each member of SAPA took responsibility for the course evaluation forms used by the same 6-7 departments or programs for which he or she had evaluated the departmental assessment reports. After conferring with each other about styles and variations in these forms, SAPA created a checklist of key characteristics found in these forms (see appendix). In particular, we were interested in quantifying how many departments used quantitative ratings and/or written responses, as well as the balance between these two types of measures. Also, we wanted to see how many incorporated questions dealing with learning objectives and learning outcomes for assessment purposes. Lastly, we

investigated how many departments tailored forms to different types of courses, whether because of content or level of the course.

Our data showed that the length of evaluation forms varied widely across departments. On average, an evaluation form featured 21 questions, of which 15 were quantitative and 6 were qualitative. However, the range in number of questions went from a low of 5 to a high of 57. Five departments used only qualitative questions, and one department used only quantitative questions. All departments asked questions about the quality of instruction and course materials, and most asked for background information from students completing the forms (e.g. reason for taking the course, year, major, GPA). Two-thirds (66.7%) of the departments asked questions concerning learning goals stated for the course. Slightly less than half (48.1%) asked questions about learning outcomes in the course. Most departments (74%) use one evaluation form for all of their courses; some (26%) customize their evaluation forms according to either the content or level of the course. Three departments, all in the Sciences, use a second form for evaluating the lab component of their courses.

4. learning outside the classroom: Each member of SAPA read two of the reports solicited on learning outside the classroom. We met to discuss their contents, and arrived at some general conclusions about the nature of these reports. Each of these departments has an evaluation process in place that provides feedback on how successfully it is pursuing its mission. Some of these evaluation forms (e.g. the Library's) attempt to measure how the learning outside the classroom has affected the student's performance in a particular course or on a particular assignment. Other evaluation forms measure the specific skills or experiences associated with the learning outside the classroom, but do not link these to performance in a particular course (e.g. ITT). This diversity in these evaluation tools reflects the differing missions of these departments, some of which sponsor programs linked to specific courses (e.g. Center for Public Service), while others provide general training and assistance applicable across the curriculum (e.g. ITT, Career Planning).

Chapter III. Conclusion and Recommendations

A. Assessment of Student Learning

1. general education: In the past, the APPC has reviewed proposed courses to make certain they are consistent with the college's mission statement and whether or not they fulfill Liberal Arts Core requirements. In the years ahead, the APPC's most important role in assessment will be determining which courses are suitable for fulfilling the new goals-based general education curriculum developed in Spring 2003. As outlined in the college's assessment plan, the Committee on Learning Assessment (COLA) will assume responsibility for assessing learning outcomes associated with the general education goals.

What has been missing from the APPC's assessment of the college's general education program in the past has been an evaluation of courses approved for the LAC requirements once they are implemented to make certain that they continue to fulfill that requirement. The APPC's new role in departmental and program reviews will give it the appropriate occasion to review syllabi and course evaluations to make sure these courses are doing what they said they would do at the time of their approval. COLA, in turn, will conduct a more general assessment of student learning outcomes related to the specific goals of the general education program.

The APPC is also the logical body for overseeing the assessment of the First Year Seminar program, a college-wide program that has come to play a significant role in the First Year curriculum and is in need of a clearly defined method of assessment.

2. programs and majors

Student learning assessment is already widely practiced at Gettysburg College at the level of departments and programs. Most of this assessment appears to occur within individual courses or in a capstone experience. SAPA is impressed by the variety of assessment methods used in these categories and by the widespread commitment among the faculty to assessing student learning. However, it appears that assessment by departments and programs could be more purposeful, systematic, and reflective.

First, we recommend that every department and program publish clear learning objectives for its majors and minors. All worthwhile assessment at the department and program level is dependent upon clear articulation of learning goals.

Second, we recommend that every department and program practice at least one method of assessment from each of the categories identified on the Assessment Methods Checklist. This will ensure assessment at all levels of their curricula. The particular assessment methods chosen should be linked to their stated learning objectives.

Third, we recommend that every department and program have a capstone experience designed to reflect and assess the key learning goals of the department or program (and in fact the faculty mandated this in the new curriculum it adopted in Spring 2003).

Fourth, we recommend that departments and programs give serious consideration to using multiple forms of majors-based assessment because these methods provide data of a broader scope about learning within the major than course-based assessment and capstone-based assessment can.

Lastly, we recommend that every department and program build into its regular meeting cycle (be it monthly, by semester, or annually) time for the systematic review of data collected by the above methods and reflection on its significance for the state of its curriculum. In this manner, departments and programs will be able to show evidence of how their practice of assessment had led to changes in their curriculum.

The Assessment Plan addresses several of these recommendations in its section on Curricular Programs, particularly in how the seven year external review will incorporate assessment practices. We would urge departments and programs rather than waiting for their next external review to address these recommendations, to use their own reports on current assessment methods to begin this work. COLA can assist in this endeavor by holding workshops and publicizing information about best practices already in use across the college.

3. individual courses

SAPA is aware that the Provost Office and faculty intend to pilot a common course evaluation form for the college in 2003-04. We applaud this effort because it will help overcome some of the problems associated with interpreting data from the variety of departmental course evaluation forms, especially in matters concerning pre-tenure, tenure, and promotion review. However, we are also impressed by the generally high quality and thoughtful composition of the departmental forms we reviewed and do not wish to see a common college-wide evaluation replace that diversity. It is important to remember that course evaluation forms tailored to the specific goals and objectives of a department, program, or instructor are an important assessment instrument for course-based learning.

Overall, SAPA feels that each department should make a purposeful effort to design questions (be they qualitative or quantitative) for their course evaluations that specifically address learning objectives and learning outcomes. Such questions will make the evaluations more accurate instruments for measuring student learning outcomes at the individual course level. Likewise, SAPA is impressed by the number of departments that have already tailored forms to specific course level or content and would recommend those evaluations as models to departments interested in following that example. Those departments with extremely short or extremely long evaluation forms should consider revising their forms in light of the comparative data made available by this report.

In reviewing the data we collected on course evaluations, it became apparent to SAPA that a significant number of the college's programs do not have course evaluation forms. It seems that in courses taught in those programs (e.g., CWES), the course evaluation used is the one associated with the department within which that particular course is taught (e.g. History, English, Philosophy). Thus, while the individual courses are evaluated by students, *the program itself has no measure in place for measuring student learning outcomes in that course specific to the goals and objectives of that program.* Therefore, we recommend that every program develop and put in place a course evaluation form based on its learning goals and objectives.

4. learning outside the classroom: All departments involved in learning outside the classroom have some form of evaluation in place that attempts to measure the impact of that experience on the student. However, efforts to measure course-related learning outcomes are not always systematic and vary from department to department. In any situation where learning outside the classroom is linked to a specific credit-bearing course, SAPA recommends that that department develop an evaluation instrument that addresses the way in which the out-of-classroom experience is related to learning goals and outcomes. Furthermore, it is important that in those situations, evaluation information should be shared between the instructor of the course and the department coordinating the out-of-classroom experience.